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JEHANE OF THE FOREST

JEHANE OF THE FOREST

21
By

L. A. TALBOT

Author of

"Lance-in-Rest," "The Duke's Jest,"
"The Footstool of the Virtues,"
etc.

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JEHANE OF THE FOREST

CHAPTER I

APRIL IN THE FOREST

THERE was quiet at the house of the Woodward in the April dawning ; quiet, but not silence, peace, but not stillness ; for the living woods are never quite still, neither are they ever quite silent : they breathe, and their breathing is audible.

To those who love the sea a day out of hearing of its voice is a sad unhomely day ; even more so to a forest dweller is a treeless world a sad one, brooded over by a weary silence. Nay, his loss is the greater, for the song of the tide comes and goes, with the waiting hours of ebb between, while the tree-voices never fail, even in the sultry summer noons, even in the winter nights of frost.

Never in their lives had Ursula and Jehane slept out of hearing of the song of trees. The convent of Our Lady of Petitions at Clee, where their childhood was spent, was lapt in a nest of foliage. Chestnut groves closed close about the walls, and at every

breeze that passed the saw-edged leaves rattled like rain.

When they returned to their father's house, these sisters of whom my story tells, they passed from the suburbs of the forest to the heart and city-centre of that world of trees which then covered the Welsh-English border, and is still cast like a mantle over many miles of hill and valley—The Forest of Wyre.

For who, by rights and duties, should live in the heart of it if not Pargeter the Woodward, keeper to the great Lord John de Fort-Castel? Earl, he, of the Forest of Wyre, and of the Far Forest; Lord of the township of Clee, with rights of taxation, of gallows and tumbril. Lord, also, of the village of Gubenhale and the manor of Ribeford; holding all this direct from the Crown under condition, as Lord Marcher, of withstanding the raids of the Welsh against the king's peace. The King in these days was Henry the Second, not long come to the throne.

Thus Earl John was a great noble, and his Woodward a franklin of substance, standing and authority, sworn to the king in the matter of venison, and to the earl in respect of timber, whether "root-fallen or wind-blown," and uniting in his person many duties. Strict in trespass whether of vert or venison, cunning in the arts of woodcraft. There was need he should be, and a bold man beside, since Wyre was not merely a park for the sport of kings and a nursery

for the masts of ships and of soldiers' bows, but the battle-ground of three races besides.

The oak of which it was mainly composed was burnt on the spot into charcoal to feed the forges on its outer margin ; huge herds of swine fattened on its acorns and beechmast, while tons of honey were yearly gathered for the king out of its hollow trunks. Thus a great deal of business went on beneath the green roof, and all, as the Woodward was bound to contrive, without annoyance to the venison of the Lord King.

Each spring the felled trees were peeled for the tanning of leather, and the most part of the bark that was stripped under the eyes of the Woodward was bought for old Edwy, the tanner of Clee, by the hand of Strong Edwy, his son.

This young man was a favourite of Pargeter's, who discovered in him a better eye for trees and head for chess than was to be expected of his years.

" Edwy comes to-day," said Pargeter at his morning meal, and saying it looked at Ursula, in whose face a delicate colour rose. At Jehane, the beautiful child Jehane, her father did not look. He did not see the red lips part to the quick breath that told how the heart was hastening, nor the damask of the cheek spread to throat and hair, and going, leave her pale.

" This morning ? " asked Ursula.

" I ride but now to meet him at Hoar Cross, and

we shall go round by Hoar Edge and Ingardine and be back, if the saints will, by two hours after noon. What have you for us ? ”

“ The hare that Dickon snared last week and the wild-duck, father.”

“ That will do well. There is no need to burn your face over-much. Old Sarah can do the basting.” He kissed her as he left the house, calling up again the innocent blush.

Meanwhile Jehane had run out to the orchard, where sprays of cherry-blossom were tossing towards the sky, or bending as if to circle her head with a bridal wreath of white fragrance. She drew one of them down until it touched her cheek, and caught at the petals that were falling like snowflakes to the fresh west wind ; she sang little snatches that were like the songs of birds, with a voice as tender as that of the wood-dove that mocked her from the forest ; and even while she sang a few tears fell.

For it is not given to all to travel from childhood to womanhood along a smooth and ordered path, at the gentle pace we Anglo-Saxons look upon as right. Passion had come to Jehane before she knew that such a thing as passion was ; a woman’s emotions were hers without a woman’s experience, and wild fancies, beautiful as wild, came to her at dawn and dark.

Round some centre or other such fancies must circle, and in the lonely forest the only object to

which romance could turn was this Edwy, big, simple, handsome Edwy, who played with her as a shy young man will often play with the younger sister while his thoughts are with the elder. Too diffident to be quite at his ease with womanly Ursula, he could always romp and play with gay Jehane, watching as he did so for the smile on Ursula's lips, and the soft colour on her cheeks, that were pale with the warm pallor of the honeysuckle horns that swing from bough to bough in the dim glades of woods.

Returning to the house with her hands full of sprays of wild cherry bloom from the trees that looked over the fence at their pruned and captive sisters, Jehane joined Ursula at her household tasks.

Like an island in a pool, the Woodward's house stood in a clearing; an open grassy space enclosed by the forest, which each year sent out sturdy trespassers; sapling oaks, holding, even in two-leaved babyhood, surprisingly fast by their mother-land; dainty seedling birches; bracken fronds, curled and woolly; and long, insinuating brambles. Here rabbits fed at dawn and dusk, casting shy glances at the house; deer grazed, and woodpeckers flashed by, laughing at their own boldness, while swallows sped over with their shrill hunting-cry. Such was the Space in summer.

In winter-time grey wolves slunk from shadow to shadow even in the noon-day, or crouched in

covert watching for the deer ; the cruel cry of the owl sounded, and the rabbit ran shrieking from his fate, the weasel, with as little success as generally attends those who shriek and run when fate is at their heels.

Several paths diverged this way and that through the woods, leading to one or other of those broad green roads, now lost, which then intersected the forest, and were known as the Great, or King's Rides.

With the exception of the chimney the house was of wood, uncut pine without and oak within, and consisted of one large chamber, out of which opened three bed-places. Behind the house, within the high wattled fence which kept out the deer, wolves and wild cattle, was a hut where lived old Dickon the treefaller, Sarah his wife, and Forester Dickon his son.

" I wonder whether Edwy will be wearing his hair in the same fashion as when last he came ? " said Ursula, meditatively, with a broom in her hand,

" I should think not, if he has his wits," retorted Jehane. " Father did not like it, and you were vastly rude to him."

" Was I ? What did I say ? "

" Only asked him if he wanted to pass for Lord Lambert. He said he only wore it so because he

thought you liked to see hair tied back with a ribbon, and then you said——”

“Never mind what I said—I have quite forgotten ; and I am sure it does not matter to me how he wears his hair. How very black it is ! It makes his face look——”

“As though it had gone into mourning for the loss of your countenance,” laughed Jehane.

“Jehane ! What would the sisters say ? ”

“I know what I shall ask him when he comes. I shall ask how many brooches he has crushed of late.”

“Indeed you shall not. His fingers are too strong for such dainty wares. He has so lamented it—as if it mattered ! You will hurt his feelings ! ”

“A fig for his feelings ! I shall ! ”

With such foolish chatter the sisters hid their hearts, yet indulged them in talk of him who was in both their thoughts.

The object of their interest was at that moment waiting for their father at the cross-roads where the ride intersected the path from Clee-town to the river at Dowlas-ford, where the Dowlas brook brings its oak-stained water to the clearer stream.

Below him, a mile or so down-stream, between the village of Gubenhale on the west bank and the manor of Ribeford on the east, the river ran blue, and barges lay waiting to receive their load of forest products to be carried to Worcester, Gloucester, or

the sea-going bottoms that would take them out round Land's End to London Port itself.

It was towards the north the young tanner looked, waiting for the Woodward, who presently appeared, a smallish figure at ease upon a black horse, looking on the youth with a good-humoured, ironical eye, seeing much but not all of a nature which, true in the main, was yet feeling its way to manhood with more difficulty than its owner knew.

With small formality of greeting they rode with an eye to bark, and talked of bark, learnedly and commercially. Presently, however, their homeward path lay through a district less interesting to them, since the trees had been so lately felled (or as foresters say, thrown) that it would be some years before they grew to marketable size again. The oak saplings still carried their last year's leaves, brown and dry as old leather, and the sap would not rise for a month to come; but here and there among them young silver birches rose like flames of green fire, as the morning sun shone through their tender leaves. They looked like captive princesses among the gnomes.

"'Tis a long time since I was last here," said Edwy, more ponderously than the observation merited.

"Three months, I believe," said the Woodward drily.

"I trust that your daughters are well."

"They are, as I believe I have told you. Jehane looks forward to a game with her old playmate. She will bide at home now—has had learning enough. I do not want them to make a nun of her."

"Small fear of that, sir, surely. A lightsome maid, and will be soon a woman."

"H'm." The Woodward looked at him edgeways. The lover drew himself up in the saddle as if he were riding for a leap.

"Sir, have I permission to woo your daughter?"

"I have two daughters."

"Sir? Ah, little Jehane! But you understand, sir, that 'tis of Ursula I speak."

"Aye? So 'tis Ursul'? Yet 'tis not so long that 'twas worse than a riddle to ask you which you liked the better."

"Pardon, sir, I was a child then, a boy."

"True. 'Tis full six months past." Then he added, changing his tone—

"Yes, my son, you have my permission to woo Ursula."

Edwy stammered thanks, protestations, vows; to which the elder man made no reply. The lover, disturbed by this reception of his warmth, was presently silent too, and so they rode on with nothing but the little clatter of dry leaves in their ears. Then Pargeter, smiling at the flushed and solemn face of his companion, spoke cheerfully.

"What men these lovers are ! What does he care that I owe all my comfort to this daughter of mine, whom I have loved better than he ever since she was born."

"As well, sir, perchance, but not better, since that could not be !"

"And his manners are so overturned that he cannot even let an old man have his say without contradicting him."

"In pity, sir," cried the lover, "do not jest at me now ! Pardon me !"

"Freely, son ; I remember my own youth ; I only beg of you that being strong you will be merciful, and let me keep Ursul' until Jehane has learned to dress venison to my taste."

"My mother herself shall give Jehane lessons, with your permission."

"With the child's consent, you had better add."

"And, sir, you will grant me time, will you not ? I do not know whether she, any more than little Jehane, thinks of wedding, or holds me in her heart."

"That you must ask of herself," said the Woodward.

Talking thus they rode on towards the dwelling in the sunny middle of the day.

CHAPTER II

APRIL IN THE HEART

"**W**ORK over, comes playtime," said Pargeter, closing his account-book, and locking it, together with sundry leather bags of coin, in an oaken chest near to which he had been completing his business with the tanner.

Both glanced at the girls, who, under the window, were working at an embroidery frame upon a piece representing the life and death of Saint Margareta, Virgin and Martyr.

Ursula was bending over the stitches, Jehane standing to catch the light upon two skeins of silk. As she held them at arms' length with head aside, her form showed plainly how slender childhood was beginning to round. The father saw it with a pang that was half pride and half regret, and the colour deepened in the young man's face. A sheepish expression spread over his handsome features, and when Pargeter took up his hat and staff, he would have followed him out. But his host turned upon him with cheerful mockery.

"Did I ask your assistance? Nay, my boy, the old man can take care of himself. Stay where you are and have an embroidery lesson. Here, girls, is a pupil for you!"

With that he went away chuckling, leaving Edwy stranded by the desk in sad embarrassment, playing with his moustache, with the knife at his belt, with a scrap of leather on the desk. Only by a vast effort did he steel himself at last to meet the eyes of the girls, Ursula's smiling encouragement, Jehane's mockingly solemn.

"So father has left him all alone, poor dear! Never mind, we will give him something to occupy his little hands, since they are so much in his way. Find me that very large needle, Ursula, you know which I mean, the one we thread with string to sew the linen in the frame. Come here, my child, and I will teach you how to thread a needle. This is just the way Sister Monica taught me—it is not very difficult, if you pay attention, and even if you prick yourself you must not cry! Now, take the needle in your left hand—no, not point uppermost! Now, the silk in your right—no, *not* the middle of the thread. the *end*! Ursula! What shall we find him for a thimble? Where is that small wine-horn? Be careful! I do not want to be stabbed to the heart!"

"Take no notice of her, Edwy, her tongue is

lively as an eel's tail. Sit, and tell us the news from Clee."

"—And miss your first and last opportunity of learning a really interesting accomplishment that I am sure no other tanner knows? Fie! I did not think it of you! How do you like this piece? Look at the dragon all made of gold thread, for the book says he glistened as if he over gilt were, and his two eyes were steeper than stars and as broad as basins. I worked him all myself! Haven't I made the fire beautiful that came out of his mouth, and his great long tongue that he wound round his neck like a tippit?"

"Jehane thinks him far more interesting than the holy maid."

"What is the story?" asked Edwy.

"It is the martyrdom of Saint Margareta," began Ursula, gravely. "She vowed herself to God when she was fifteen years of age. There she sits, tending her foster-mother's sheep. This is Olivarius, the heathen of high degree, who, riding by and seeing her beauty, asks her hand in marriage, but she will give herself to no man, seeing that she is the bride of Christ. Here they are on the road to Antioch, where he has her carried to have her tortured until she will consent. There the soldiers beat her bare body with bitter besoms (as you may read), and here they cut her with swords and with

awls of iron that the onlookers hide their heads for sorrow. Here you see is the Foul Fiend (Jehane *will* call him a dragon), so grisly that he agrose all who saw, and here she throws him down in the might of her saintliness and stands upon his neck, while a light from heaven shines into her torture house. In this corner hovers the dove burning bright, who lays a crown upon her head in the midst of her wounding, and here in the centre (only I have not quite finished it) her head has been smitten off for her greater glory, and a company of flashing angels from heaven descend to bless her tortured body."

"Poor little soul!" was Edwy's unorthodox comment.

"Poor! Little! Soul! Great and happy soul, you should say," cried Jehane, genuinely shocked. "I used to think you as good as an abbess, but that is a long while ago. Do you not wish for Ursula as happy a fate as Saint Margareta's? For me, I am too wicked."

"I wish you both a far different fate," said he, looking down at Ursula, flushed with the feeling of the story.

"What do you mean by that?"

Edwy was tongue-tied.

"What do you say? You speak so low!" persisted Jehane.

"I said that I have not your marvellous speed of

tongue, Jenny," he retorted, finding words at last. To call Jehane Jenny was ever a call to arms. She rose, pointing the needle with tragic gesture towards his breast.

"Beware!" she cried, "you can bully Ursula, she never defends herself. That is why you and she suit one another so well. But I am not Ursula, remember that, young man! I take blood for blood!"

"At least I have roused you from your stitching, which I am sure is not good for your health. Ursula, shall we not come out before the sun sets?"

"He never asks whether *I* want to wander in the cold forest!" murmured Jehane in a mock-tragic aside.

Edwy fetched his riding-crop from the corner of the room and threatened the laughing girl. She, after dancing round him and deftly administering a few pricks with the large needle, fled in mimic fear, he pursuing with exaggerated demonstration of the hunting-crop. Ursula was laughing at them softly.

By a cluster of silver birches in the middle of the Space the chase ended.

"Penance—you shall do penance for this——" laughed Edwy. "You have wounded a peaceful citizen——"

"Flagellation?" panted Jehane.

"I have not decided. Yes, I have! See, Jehane, you have not given me my greeting yet! What was

your excuse? Too old to be kissed. Nonsense! So long as you wear your hair so"—he held up one of the dark tresses, just tawny at the tips—"you cannot plead old age. No! One I claim for old acquaintance and the Customs of the Kingdom, as men of law say, and another for penance."

Jehane was still struggling and laughing, but now more with excitement than gaiety. They were out of sight of the house, in the marge of the thick woods. He kissed her once as she struggled, and the kiss fell on her hair, but for the other she turned to him, their lips met, and for a moment he held her in his arms. The next they stood apart, staring at one another with wide eyes and pale faces. Jehane was the first to move; she walked slowly down the bridle-path, he following.

"See you, Jehane, you are not angry?"

She shook her head.

"That's well. You deserved some punishment for pricking me; but if I have vexed you I sue for peace. Do you forgive me?"

She walked straight on.

"I—wanted to ask you a question."

"Ask it—if you still want to."

"Yes—yes, of course I do. See, you have always been my little friend, ever since you wore a red hood and I lifted you up to see the robin's nest in the apple tree?"

"Yes, Edwy," she said, walking slower.

"We fight, but we like one another none the less for that?"

"None the less."

"Ursula and I never fight, yet perchance she does not like me half as well as you do. What think you? Does she?"

"I do not know," answered Jehane, indifferently, "I think she likes you well enough when you do not mammock her brooches."

"Surely she is not still enangered about that! Yet she was very silent just now."

"She is ever silent when I am by—has to be, poor thing. Do you want to go back and talk to her?"

"Presently. I want you to tell me first which likes me best, you or Ursula. She is ever gentle and kind, but—you kissed me fair and frankly, which she has never done. You like me too, do you not? And when I am betrothed to Ursula—if ever she deems me worthy—you will not speak ill of me to her?"

Here Jehane stopped so suddenly in her walking that Edwy would have run into her bodily had he not taken her shoulders in his hands. Mistaking the action, she turned on him with gleaming eyes in a white face, and hit him sharply across the mouth with the back of her little hand; then fled, crying back at him,

"Go you to Ursul', I like you not at all—not at all—*not at all!*"

Ursula had covered Saint Margareta with a soft white sheet, had rearranged the kerchief upon her head, pinned a spray of blackthorn in her bosom, and was standing at the door when Edwy returned. His lip was bleeding, having been cut against an irregular tooth, and when she cried out at the blood upon his mouth he said that a branch had fled back and struck him. She was hardly satisfied: Was he sure that he had no other hurt? What was then amiss? For his gaiety was all gone, and he wore a look that had never rested on his honest face before—the look of a craven.

She tended the little wound, and then he asked her pity for the wound he said she had made in his heart, and she gave him the kind word and gentle kisses her love suggested; then he told her how happy he felt, and how her father's consent being already won she might prepare herself for the betrothal.

Ursula knew nothing about lovers; she had turned with contempt from the unpermitted whisperings of the convent school, and she had no written romances to teach her. She did not know how a true lover should speak or look; she only knew that Edwy's manner was unsettled and apprehensive, and wondered whether betrothal was ever thus.

Nevertheless, it was sweet, the realizing of her

secret hope, and in the wonder of it she sat with her lover, watching the sun as he dipped behind the bare oak branches, and the green feathers of the birch, till the fire of his rays on the white satin stems crept higher and higher and was gone. But even her lover's hand in hers could not make Ursula forget her little sister for long.

"Where did you leave Jehane?" she said.

"I parted from her in the wood close by. I—I told her something of my hopes, and I fear the thought of losing you upset her, for she ran from me in haste. Shall we seek her?"

"I will go alone. Poor little one! We have never been parted—how selfish of me to forget her! No, Edwy, I will go alone. Wait for me here, I will not be long. I will go towards Wolferlow, she loves that hill, and ever runs to it in trouble."

Edwy would have preferred himself to tell Jehane of this impending betrothal, but he could not force himself upon Ursula.

CHAPTER III

THE VISION IN THE HOLLOW

SHADRACHS was one of those forest names whose origin had already been lost. Possibly it was a Welsh word and had no connexion with any human Shadrach ; but certainly no one knew, or cared.

It was a three-sided hollow, where a small stream joined a still smaller one. Its wooded sides sloped sharply, and from under the dry leaves, so seldom stirred by any wind, primroses and wild hyacinths pushed to light and bloomed sooner than anywhere in the forest round. The south and west banks were already studded with them.

Small as the brooks were, they were lively. Even in the dry, easterly weather that prevailed they found stones and chuckled over them, made holes in their banks to gurgle and laugh in, tripped down shallow reaches with low songs, and lay down to rest, spanned by bramble and honeysuckle, in pools quite two feet deep. At the tops of the trees leaves were rattling in the wind, but at their roots the brooks had the talking to themselves.

Between them, in the only level spot, was one of those round bare patches so well known to every forest wanderer, carpeted with mosses of copper and gold, showing the position of a charcoal-burner's hearth. Upon one side stood a square pile, or rank, of last year's wood ready for the burning, its four corners fastened with willow wands, three of them to stakes, and the fourth to a live sapling. Against the rank a young man was leaning dejectedly.

His dress was of satin, purple in hue and of courtly fashion, but there was more than one rent in his tunic and tight hose, as though he had wandered carelessly in rough paths, not heeding their thorns and branches. His shoulders were protected by nothing better than a cloak of hodden grey; his courtly shoes, curled up at the toes, were stained and split, the feathers in his bonnet hung limply.

He was a strange figure to come upon, all alone in the forest, suggestive of some malefactor seeking a Liberty, or a lordless outlaw maintaining himself by deerstealing; but a glance showed that the youth's expression had neither the alertness of the hunted nor the defiance of the outcast. The sunset shone into his face, a lean Norman face, clean-shaved after the Norman way; it made his fair hair, tied back with a purple ribbon, shine like gold. His eyes were the keen blue eyes of the sea-kings, new to such gloomy preoccupation as now filled them, as he stared

straight before him at a tangle of undergrowth with a fixed melancholy gaze.

Suddenly his face changed, the lax lines of depression tightened and his eyes, without changing their direction, kindled and opened wide ; for through the brushwood he saw another pair of eyes, looking into his.

To say that his heart quickened its beating is no indictment of the young man's courage ; for not only were there bears, wolves and wild-cats in the forest, each capable of endangering a man's life, but powers from another world haunted the woods to catch the unwary. Powers very terrible and not to be escaped by any earthly prowess. For the beasts he had a sword, but he felt himself lacking in the odour of sanctity which is man's only defence against the powers of darkness in any form. Apart from the Spectral Hounds and their invisible Quarry, demons which ranged the forest over, and the Dead Hand that drew men to destruction in boggy places, Shadrachs had a haunting Spirit all to itself.

It took the form of a beautiful young woman who sat by the brookside in the evening, counting gold coins upon her knee, thus casting an irresistible spell over those whose hearts were set on riches. To see her was death ; to speak with her, misfortune worse than death ; to accept one of her coins, hell.

Now this young man was guiltily conscious that at the moment when the eyes met his, his mind was occupied with a great longing for money, so that he was a right and meet victim for the place's special demon. He drew his sword, but he trusted more to the cross at its hilt than to the steel, for after the first moment he was certain they were not the eyes of a beast that were looking into his, and with a muttered prayer he stepped forward, to find no demon at all, but a young girl with a great mane of dark hair, a glowing colour, and red parted lips, who laughed in his startled face with fearless, mischievous merriment.

"How frightened you were!" she cried, "I did not think you would see me!"

"I did not expect to meet a fair maiden in the forest," he replied with creditable self-possession, sheathing his sword.

"And I did not expect to meet a gentleman in satin. Who are you?"

The young man seemed painfully embarrassed by this blunt question.

"Who am I?" he stammered. "I am—as you see—as you say ——"

"A gentleman in satin. Yes, I see so much. But what is your name?"

"Forgive me. I cannot give you my true name, and I do not choose to give a false one."

"As you will. Only if you give no account of yourself at all, I must let my father know that he had better look to the safety of the king's deer, since there are more outlawed men in these woods than he wots of."

"I am no outlaw—just the contrary—but you speak of your father as one in charge of the woods—who is your father?"

"My father is Woodward to Earl John of Clee," said the girl proudly, "he has in charge both vert and venison from Clee to the river, and from Hoar Cross to Wallfurlong; he has six foresters under him and he knows all who live within the forest bounds and who has the right to be abroad after nightfall. I have not, myself," she added, under her breath, "and I do not think that you have."

"I pray you of your gentleness do not tell the Woodward that you have seen me. I am in trouble as it is."

"Do you live in the forest bounds?"

"Not exactly."

"If you will tell me truthfully all about yourself, I shall be able to judge what is my duty in the matter," said Jehane, demurely, but with dancing eyes.

"I am not on any evil errand. I am a penitent sinner, who cannot muster up one white coin for the priest."

"Then, though I am no priest, I will hear your confession without cost."

The young man's distress was so genuine that he could find no response to the challenge.

"Well, I will trust you," he said, "since I must."

"Of course you must. It is your only way to escape having the foresters and dogs set on your track."

Thus encouraged, the youth began his story, while Jehane, her beauty glowing like a live ruby in the sunset, her eyes still overbright from her late wrath with Edwy, her little mouth now fierce, now laughing, perched herself upon the oak-pile, and leaning on the sapling let herself sway as it swayed.

"My name is Lambert de Fort-Castel——"

"Not Lord Lambert! Not the young Earl!"

"To-day at least I may call myself so, though to-morrow, who knows! Only son at least I am to John de Fort-Castel of Clee, though wandering in his forest as poor as any rabbit; nay, poorer, for the rabbit has a home, I none; he gets his own bread, while I am a beggar. I give myself into your mercy, fair maid, trusting you are gentle as well as fair. I will tell you what has brought me to this. My father is an angry man, and obstinate, and there is one sin that he abhors——"

"Only one?"

"I said not that, pretty mocker; but in truth there is but one sin he will never forgive in me, and that is the sin of the gambler. If you knew his history you would know he has reason enough, so that he had sooner the devil or our cousin de Bourg had the earldom than a gambler. So when he sent me overseas to learn my devoir, he told me that if I shook the dice even once he would disinherit me without word spoken. Once? Jesu! I have played and lost, and played and lost again. It must have been my grandfather in me! It was with borrowed money I got back to England, leaving even Wulf behind. I meant to ask forgiveness, and that was well to think of when I was in Normandy, but when I reached the castle gate [my father's face came before me and I dared not. I dared not risk my lands, my name! I have not a penny to get my boots clouted—I have cast myself on the mercy of some poor hinds, who love me even more than they fear my father. Good souls, they fare poorly to feed me, and I fare not richly."

"But what are you going to do, Lambert de Fort-Castel?" asked Jehane, looking from his anxious face to his split shoes, "you cannot stay in the forest."

"I was trying to think out a plan——"

"When you saw me hiding in a bush till you should be pleased to go away."

"If I could reach my uncle, the Abbot of York, he would plead for me. Perchance (the power of the Church is great) he might at least restrain my father from ruining me in the first heat of his wrath. I sent a message when I landed, but 'twas not a sure hand; I had nothing wherewith to buy surety. Had I a few pieces, I would make shift to reach him."

While Jehane was listening to the young man's unaffected story, her demeanour changed; at first she had simply seized upon the excitement of this chance encounter to forget her own discomfiture. She had done a good many things she knew she ought not to have done; chatted and laughed with a most suspicious stranger; wandered in the forest after sunset; sat in the presence of the young Lord, and as good as promised to keep a secret from her father—each one a sin. She had been naughty not so much for its own sake as that it put Edwy out of her thoughts; but as Lambert talked on she lost by degrees her air of child-like frivolity, and her face became grave and intent.

When, ceasing, he seemed to forget his listener, and with downcast eyes began to cut patterns with his sword-point in the moss, she roused him abruptly with a question.

"Is that sword of yours sharp?"

"My sword?" He repeated in surprise. "Yes, indifferent so, I suppose."

"Ah! It must be queer to have a sharp sword. Are you good-tempered?"

"Not so very. Not as bad as my father. Are you afraid I shall cut your head off?"

"No. That would be silly. I was only thinking I am glad I do not carry anything sharp about me."

"You do," said Lambert, smiling.

"How much money should you want to take you to York?"

"Only a few shillings. That is if I can come by a horse."

"A horse? Would a pony do?"

"Anything, so it would carry me. Is it possible you can tell me of one? The wild ponies from the laund perhaps——"

"Would certainly lose you your brains against a tree if you stayed long enough on the back of one to try," laughed Jehane, "but come here to-morrow early. I promise nothing except that I will not send father and the dogs in my place, and so, good night, Sir Lambert; I am in haste to be home before they seek me. My sister passed along that path while we were talking and saw both you and me. But she has sense, my sister Ursula, and you need not fear. An hour before sunrise then—that is if you mean to risk it, gambler! To stake your life on a girl's promise! Fie on such recklessness, fie!"

She leapt from the wood-pile, made her obeisance, and was gone between the trees quick as a bird.

When she left the dim pathway for the clear green light of the Space, Edwy was standing in the doorway alone. He tried to assume his usual manner, though he looked uncomfortable and shamefaced.

"Have you met Ursula?" he asked, "she has gone to Wolferlow to seek you. It is late for her, or for you, to be out alone in the forest. But I see her coming. Jehane, my dear little sister, you must try not to be enangered with me, either for taking her from you, or for other reasons."

"You have asked betrothal then? You have our father's consent?"

"I have."

She turned her vivid dark eyes on him in intensest scorn.

"Father does not know you."

"To-night we take the vows. Say you forgive me, Jehane?" His voice was almost inaudible. The unsuspecting Ursula was but a few yards away.

"I do not forgive you. If I had power, you should never marry Ursula. But as I have none, I will hold my tongue. You need not be afraid."

"Why should you be so bitter against me?"

"You are not good enough, or enough of a

man, to marry Ursula. Besides, you are a coward."

For the second time that day she had given him a blow that he could not resent. He cleared his brow as he could to meet Ursula's eyes.

CHAPTER IV

A SECRET TRYST

ROUND the Woodward's dwelling the forest was breathing softly in the scented spring night. From far off came the howl of a wolf, and breaking across it, the owl's cry, sad and shrill. There were little voices in the air, delicate steppings on the dry leaves, and from the orchard the ponies might be heard cropping. Through the small barred opening of her chamber Jehane could see the head of her own pet, brown Prince, with pricked ears, sniffing at the wolf's cry, while cherry blossom filled in the frame above him. She lay stiffly, hardening herself to resist the familiar tenderness of her sister nestling beside her as the night air blew in chill.

Jehane had guessed rightly that Ursula would say nothing to any one about the encounter in Shadrachs until she had spoken with her alone. After waiting in vain for some word about her betrothal, she asked,

"Who was it you spoke with in the forest, sis?"

"What do you mean? When?" asked Jehane, innocently.

"The stranger you were talking with in Shadrachs this evening. You saw me pass."

"Truly I saw you pass, and would not disturb your dreams. Whom did you see there? An image of Edwy wheresoever you looked?"

"Foolish child! No, the odd-looking stranger. Who was he? Our father should know of his presence, so near."

"Ursula! Ursula dear! Did you then see—something else in Shadrachs—beside me?"

She sat up, a slim white figure.

"Do not jest any more, sis," said Ursula, "who was he?"

"Jest indeed! What was it like? Tell me?"

"Like? A man, of course, in some courtly dress, as you know well, Jehane; Jehane, be not so foolish. This is beyond a jest. Tell me soberly, who was he?" Jehane shivered.

"What can it forebode? Think you the good sisters could tell us? I mind me now of a shivering that came upon me as I sat upon the oak-rank. I thought it was the chill air from the brook—and it must have been the Spirit all the while!"

There was no pretence about the burst of stifled laughter and tears that reached the Woodward, sitting by the fire with Edwy, and caused him to growl,

"Gibing and laughing at naught, like the rest. Go to sleep, girls."

After this they talked no more, and soon, but at a

later hour than ordinary, the household slumbered ; all, that is, except Jehane, who lay staring at the white blossoms against the grey sky, listening to the tender sounds, thinking of what had happened.

First she thought of all she was going to do for Lord Lambert, and how to set about it ; then smiled, not at all penitent, at the deception she had practised on Ursula. For to begin with, she did not think that Ursula had believed her, and in that case no wrong had been done, while if her story had passed current—well, she had often practised similar light fence with the nuns and had had but small penance. At the worst she could plead necessity, for she only meant to keep Lord Lambert's secret while it was essential for his safety.

Her plans were soon laid, but still she gazed through the bars at the softly curving cherry-blossoms. What kept her waking, what brought tears that welled and overflowed into her little ears, had nothing to do with Lord Lambert. Neither was it for having struck a blow in anger, though for that she meant to do penance ; nor for her anger itself.

Jehane's character was strong, but so also were her passions, and in her ignorance of this lay her weakness. It had sometimes, to be sure, occurred to her that she liked and disliked things more violently than did the good nuns ; but that would be accounted

for by their holiness. She dimly acknowledged, too, that she generally had her own way at home ; but this, she thought, was because they spoiled her. Her attempts, under Holy Church's direction, to ' know herself,' had hitherto been unsuccessful, not so much because she was so young as because her mind was one that looked out rather than in. Had she found anything in her heart which needed control she would have fought and curbed it, for she loved righteousness, and sought it by simple methods ; but she found nothing.

Consequently her present distress puzzled her. She only knew her sky had darkened, and knew not why.

Her feeling for Edwy was undefined and romantic, as far from the love that hopes for marriage, as it was from the sisterly affection she thought it. It had been wounded by his kiss, wounded by his betrothal ; it had been a pretty fragile thing that never could have lived very long, but it had died so suddenly ! At that unlucky kiss, hate had looked through the trees, looked and frowned and gone, and so going had slain this small attractive cousin of love ; so Jehane dug a little grave to lay him in, covered him over, and dropped a tear or two. Then, fearing that sobs might follow, she deemed it safer, though Ursula was a sound sleeper, to turn her thoughts to the more cheerful subject again.

It was grey twilight when she crept from her sister's side. Ursula drew a long breath, and her brows knitted, as though her spirit were urging her sleep-drowned body to rise and forbid this beloved sister to go on so strange an errand. But the frown passed, and Jehane, having dressed herself in the short wollen gown and cross-folded leggings which all wore in the forest, with a thick mantle and hood, drew from the deepest corner of her chest a little leather bag similar to those in which the Woodward kept his coin, put it in her bosom, and passed quietly through the dwelling into the chill air outside.

The dogs saw her, but knew their duty better than to bark, as she went swift and silent to where her pony, Prince, was grazing in the orchard. Stepping up to him, she laid her hand firmly on his nose, for he would whinny and probably wake someone if she did not take him by surprise. Then she went to the stable. Before leaving the house, she had taken the stable-key from its nail upon the wall, and had not been unwilling that the blame of having neglected to secure the door should fall upon Boar Dickon; for Jehane was not friends with Dickon. But she was glad to find that the reproof would be merited, for the stable door was on the latch.

She looked at her father's horse, Paynim, and thought how much better he would befit a baron's

son than the homely hairy little beast she purposed lending him. But even had she dared such a lawless borrowing, Paynim was far too well known on the forest roads to pass unchallenged. So she contented herself with Young Dickon's saddle, and a feed of corn in a bag. Then she ran back to the house, took a pie and a loaf from the larder, laid them on the corn, fastened the mouth of the bag, and hung it to the saddle by the thongs that were there for the purpose ; put the stable key on its nail again, and set out for Shadrachs.

Her path crossed the Great Ride, and, continuing on the further side of it, skirted the hollow ; but here she must dismount and descend on foot. It struck her as she did so that she would feel very foolish if the young Lord had made up his mind not to trust her ; but the next moment she saw him by the oak-rank, not, as before, leaning dejectedly against it, but alert and on the look-out. He was girt for journeying, the old cloak belted about him, its hood drawn over his head, a woodman's high boots upon his feet, and his sword ready.

In his dejection and uncertainty of the previous night, there had been something very youthful in his air, but now, for all his curious mingled garb, he wore the dignity of manhood, and looked about him with lordship.

When he saw Jehane, he scrambled up the side of

the gully, catching at the tree-trunks, and came to her, expressing his gratitude in fervent and well-chosen phrases.

"You believed my word then, sir?" she said, a little shyly.

"Surely, since you relied on mine," he answered with a glance of frank admiration, "how did you know I was not an outlaw?"

"I did not know, I have come to find out," said Jehane, her shyness vanishing, leaving her the bolder for its visit, "I am very inquisitive; everyone tells me so. But why are you looking at Prince like that? I meant to lend him to you, but if you do not like him I will take him home again."

"I think he is a beauty," said Lambert, repressing a smile, "but you cannot deny he is small. I fear I should be too heavy for him, and I should not like to do him harm."

"I do not think you will hurt him. When he is tired or vexed he lies down, and you have to be quick or he lies on you. That is his only fault, and he never does it to me. He is much stronger than you think, and if you walk a mile or so now and then and talk to him nicely he will suffice for all you need. Do not imagine I mean you to ride to York on him; but he will take you far enough for you to buy a horse without word being carried back to Clee. Now I will tell you what you must do. This path where

we are standing—but I expect you know the woods better than I do——”

“I hardly know them at all. I used to hunt in them before I went to Normandy, but now I have quite forgotten.”

“Oh—that is odd. Well, if you go along this path you come into the King’s Ride. Take the right of it and you will come into the Great North Road, which passes through Wenlock Liberty. Keep upstream towards the north. I suppose you know how to keep your face to the north ? ”

“Yes, I do know as much as that.”

“By mid-day you should be level with Bridgnorth. You will see the castle, but do not go near it. Keep in the thick of the woods, and it will be time to give Prince a rest and this corn. Rest him at least three hours, and here is a cake I stole for you and a little pie ; I shall say I gave them to a hungry man I met. That will be true, will it not ? ”

“Very true ! I hardly knew how true until I saw them. How do these churls manage to live on barley bread and porridge ! Is there any law against my eating that pie while you give me the rest of my instructions ? ”

Jehane laughed with delight as she saw his teeth meet in the pastry.

“Then when Prince is rested (you will know when, because he will try to bite through his halter) you

must go on, still upstream, but there is no road this side of the river any further than Bridgnorth, and it would never do for you to cross, so you will have to use your wits. If you meet charcoal burners you may safely ask your way of them, or at the Great Abbey of Wenlock if you are not known there ; but be sure you do not speak to foresters. By dark you should be near Shrewsbury. Let Prince go, he will find his way home, and you can enter the town on foot." She took a little bag from her pouch.

"I have brought this for you too. It is my own money, so you may be sure it is not much, and to make it more, look ! you shall have my gold collar. I never wear it, I do not like the feeling. No one will know it so many miles away, and you can sell it, or exchange it for a horse."

"How can I possibly thank you ! " exclaimed the young man, with much feeling. "If I gain my uncle's ear, and, as I hope, he intercedes for me with my father, I shall owe my lands and my future earldom to you alone. When I return you must ask me what you will, even to the half of my possessions, and they shall be yours."

"Oh, that is only a saying ! To the half of my kingdom—it is what the fairy princes all say in the ballad books."

The young baron frowned.

"Since you do not believe my word," he said, "I

suppose I must give you my oath, though I should hardly have thought it was needful. I swear by God's glory, and by the sword of Saint Lambert, that as you have been ungrudging in your service to a stranger, so shall my gratitude to you be ungrudging. If it is my fortune to return my fathers heir, ask what you will of Lambert de Fort-Castel, and he will give it you. If it is my doom to be a landless wanderer, call on Lambert the outlaw, and what his right hand can get for you shall equally be yours."

Jehane was quite subdued by this solemnity, and there was a silence save for the long sad whistle of a starling. Then she said quickly,

"I shall remember that oath. Now it is full time you started. Come, Prince——" she put her cheek to the pony's soft nose, and looked up laughing, "I forgot. He must kneel to his overlord. I taught him this. He has very good brains, my Princeling."

She smoothed his ears, whistling to him softly, and with a queer glance of remonstrance the little animal knelt.

"Accept his homage! Receive your vassal!" she cried, delighted.

Lambert touched the matted forehead with his toe, saying,

"I accept your homage, Brown Prince, and I hope you will see fit to be kind to your overlord."

When he had mounted, he bent, with the evident intention of rewarding the pretty little franklin with a kiss. But Jehane drew back.

"No, indeed, I do not like them—but—if you wish——" she held out her hand, and Lambert kissed it with the way he had learned among princes.

"Goodbye, and God speed you," cried Jehane, as if she had indeed been his equal, and with a slap she sent the pony off at a trot. Prince sidled and swerved, and a branch scraped back the discreet hood. Forced to give his attention to his wayward mount, Lambert hardly had time for a backward glance.

Jehane watched him go. It was full daylight, almost time for sunrising. The grey cloak and brown pony were soon lost sight of between grey sky and brown oaks, but long after they had disappeared the purple cap showed by moments, and still longer the glint of coming day shone on the yellow hair. At last all was gone, and even the sound of the pony's tread was not to be distinguished from the rustle of rabbit or fawn in the coverts.

Jehane walked slowly back, and stood looking into the hollow, full of shadow, full of the scent of night-time and of waters, full, as always, of the sound of waters. Her lips moved to a smile, a childish, pleased smile, then parted over her teeth as she laughed outright.

How delightful it had all been ! She went over it

again. There Lord Lambert had stood, gloomy and despairing ; there she had hidden behind the thorn-bush ; there she had laughed at him, calling him gambler while he looked in her face, half trusting, half doubting, and (she was sure of it) admiring.

To think of it ! She, little Jehane, the Woodward's child, had met with this man, who was young, powerful, and as much above her by station as she was above young Dickon. She had found him wavering, almost despairing, afraid to face the trouble his own folly had brought about ; she alone, no one helping or advising her, had given him money and food, had set him on horseback, directed his journey, inspired him with hope, changed, perhaps, the whole course of his life. She performed a dance of delight.

As she danced, to the amaze of the little wood-people, the sun rose ; but looked upon her with no kindly eye, no placid promise of fair weather ; with redness of anger and threat of storm, he glared through a gap in the east.

"It is going to rain," she said to herself, "but not yet," and turning her back on the sun, she set off home.

Her part there was even easier to play than she had anticipated. Her father was very angry with Boar Dickon, and took away the charge of the stable-key from him. The general idea was that Prince and the saddle had been stolen, but there was no

lamentation made for the pony, as all had confidence in his capacity to find his own way back.

If Ursula had any thoughts of her own on the subject, or connected these events with what she had seen the night before in Shadrachs she wisely refrained her tongue, and let the men talk out their talk. Jehane merely remarked that Prince was as well able to take care of himself as anyone in the world, and that wolves did not hunt in packs at this time of the year.

So that by the time that the Woodward and Edwy left for Clee to discuss the betrothal with old Edwy, the incident had been put aside for further developments.

CHAPTER V

SUMMER

SUMMER passed over the forest. The brown oak-buds opened to green plumes which leaf by leaf shut out the sun. In the twilight below, bramble, bracken and heath sprang and blossomed, hares kindled, vipers bred, and birds nested, free of man's interference ; for, save in the roads and clearings, the forest in summer is impenetrable.

The cuckoo had come and gone ; the swallows had come and were not yet flown, but waged a day-long warfare against midge and gnat.

Prince had returned, saddle, saddle-bag and all, with a varied assortment of mudstains on his legs. Divers theories were advanced to account for his escapade, but Ursula still asked no question of Jehane as to the being, man or spirit, with whom she had had speech in Shadrachs the day before the disappearance. He sometimes seemed to stand between the sisters, but not often.

To Ursula the summer was a peaceful time : it passed in preparations for her marriage, in tutoring Jehane in the household matters which would soon

be left in her care, in tender attentions to her father, in dreams of Edwy. If she wondered now and then whether for other girls the days of betrothal were as softly shadowy as her own : if she ever wished she could ask a mother whether all lovers went with as apologetic and unsettled an air as did hers ; such vague troubles could not seriously affect the strong peace that was hers by the gift of God.

Jehane marvelled both at father and sister. How was it they could be so tranquil, and contemplate the future with so placid an outlook, while she could feel trouble coming just as Boar Dickon could smell the rain before a cloud was in the sky ? It was neither reason nor second sight which give her this certain knowledge ; it was merely that she was sensitive to the undercurrents of life, was, as Ursula once put it, " nearer to things " than other people.

For her the summer fled all too quickly, for she dreaded what a change might bring. She lived the weeks in a suspension of life, and waited, in spectator's mood, for the beginning of a new act, in which she would be on the stage herself. The present hour was dull, for there were no romances to weave about Edwy, and she did not exalt Lord Lambert to the vacant post of hero, though she thought much of him and his mission to York. Her feeling towards the young Baron rested on a foundation which has supported loves far greater than her fleeting passion

for Edwy. He was her superior, yet he had been dependent upon her; she had ministered to his wants, he had accepted her money, had ridden her pony, had eaten her pie. How glorious a roll of high and abiding affections rests on this :—he (or she) has eaten our pie. Henceforward we owe duty, tenderness, love.

It was natural that she should institute comparisons between the two men, the only two with whom she had conversed freely. Edwy had a good slow brain, competent for chess and tanning, but he was always hopelessly beaten in any contest of wits with Jehane, and this not only because of her superior quickness and impertinence; she always had to explain her points to him, and point out her allusions. It was true that Lord Lambert had not been particularly brilliant when she had had dealings with him, but she was sure that he would never need to have points explained to him. He was good, she was sure of that too. Perhaps Edwy was good, at least she used to think so, but in the presence of the young noble she had caught a glimpse of moral heights that she was quite sure Edwy had never climbed.

The immense gulf of rank and nationality, he one of the conquerors, she a loyal daughter of the conquered, oppressed her about as much as it oppressed one of the English doves that flew in and

out of the Norman castle keep. She understood the position, which the doves did not, and there it ended. Beyond that, Lambert was Lambert, and she was Jehane.

In August he came back from York. Returned with his uncle the abbot to forgiveness and reinstatement. Preparations for his knighting were begun immediately.

It was midnight, but so clear was the summer sky on the high land where Clee castle stood, that the starlight came in through the windows of the chapel, where the altar candles burnt steadily, their flames reflected in faint steady points from the burnished armour that hung on each side of the crucifix; breast-plate, helmet, and shield, new and undinted. On the altar step kneeled Lambert, between star and candle-light; for it was the vigil of his knight-
ing.

The preparatory ceremonies had taken place. In charge of two youths, esquires of honour, he had been escorted to the bath, where two grave and ancient knights had instructed him in the duties of knight-hood and in feats of chivalry. Then, robed in russet, he was escorted by them to the chapel, to be alone with God and his own thoughts.

The thoughts of youth are long, but they are also swift, and a night is enough for many. A soul prac-

tised in prayer, as that of a holy monk, might indeed spend the whole night in unbroken supplications ; but Lambert's was not yet disciplined to such a labour. In all earnestness he prayed God and Saint Lambert to make and keep him worthy of his vows ; in all honesty swore that he would renounce the sin that had so nearly been his ruin : never again would he shake the dice to his undoing.

But still the night was young, and there were many visions to beleaguer the mind of one who stood upon the threshold of life, ready to take what it will give, to snatch what it would withhold.

There had been a great banquet that day, and among the songs and feasting the old earl had spoken words that had given his son food for thought, food such as the young can rarely turn from. Leaning from his place at the head of the long tables towards Lambert, who sat between the two ladies who were to assist at his arming on the morrow, Earl John had laughed until his face was red, and had spoken for any to hear.

" Make but one mouthful of it, son—knighthood and betrothal—manhood and matrimony ! They go right well together. What say you, ladies ? He may neither eat nor drink before his vows, but I know not that aught is said about kissing ! "

He remembered it now, in the silent twilight chapel.

Lady Eleanor, and Lady Maud.

Lady Eleanor was heir to the Earldom of Bel-Forest in Normandy, which marched with the lands of the Fort-Castels. Fort-Castle was a fortress on a barren rock, Bel-Forest a fertile land of wood and stream ; together, what a domain ! Clee was a compact little estate, but every Norman ought to have a foot on both sides of the water. With such a dominion, with prowess of arms, with a little diplomacy, and perchance the favour of the young king, who, they said, had a keen eye for a strong man, to what heights might not he, Lambert, rise ? His head was quite giddy, even thinking of it.

Lady Eleanor was thus a right suitable match, and yet not exactly the wife his fancy cried for. She had been once married already ; she was not young enough ; she lacked the freshness, the innocence and lightness he desired ; her voice was harsh and deep, all unlike a soft shrill voice that he remembered, that laughed and mocked and yet was young and true.

Then there was Lady Maud. She was young, of a princely house, and not wholly landless either. Tender she was too, for had she not leaned against his shoulder and touched his hand as he passed the wine cup ? Soft and womanly, ripe and ready, the very mate for a young man's desire. He leaned towards her in his thoughts, remembering her soft touch ; though he had noticed even at the time how large

and fat her hands were, different from some hands he knew that were little and brown and strong. On the whole, he thought Eleanor was the wife for him, Eleanor and Bel-Forest. For after all, if he did take a wife with a manly voice and little hairs upon her chin, she was not the only woman in the world. He would not be bound to her any more than his fellows, or his own father were bound to their wives; he would not need to bid farewell for ever to Lady Maud or little forest maids. He smiled and bit his lip.

"Peace be with you, my son."

It was an old and tremulous voice that came through the shadows, and he knew it for the voice of Father Giles. He had never considered himself the spiritual son of the old man, whom he did not think of at all except when he crossed his path. Earl John cared little for priests, and Giles was but a dependant such as it was every nobleman's duty to have on hand, a servant more honourable than the jester, less necessary than the huntsman. Being the only man in the castle who could read, he had taught Lambert and Wulf his foster-brother such letters as he knew himself; but he set up no authority over the two boys. They liked and patronized him, and troubled their minds very little about matters of conscience.

The old priest's heart had smitten him when the

proud careless lad had gone away to the Court of Normandy so unshielded against the temptations that would surround him there, and he resolved to find an opportunity to repair the wrong of which his conscience accused him.

Yet when Lambert returned, riding lordly at the Bishop's side, a humble reverence on the priest's part, a condescending smile on the young man's, was all that passed between them.

As the days went by, each fuller of bustle and parade than the last, his conscience smote him more and more, and he entreated the Virgin that she would mercifully repair his sin of omission, since he dared not do it himself. As he prayed, however, he began to doubt whether it was likely that so cowardly a petition would be answered, and his heart yearned more and more towards the young man he had nursed as a babe on his knee, and more and more clearly came back to his mind the face of the dying countess as she whispered to him her hopes and fears for the son she must leave to a father who cared nothing for the things of God. He had neglected her wishes for fear of the Earl's wrath and the careless laugh of the boy ! Yet perchance even yet, a late reparation was in his power, since Our Lady is good.

He stole softly up the narrow staircase to the gallery above the choir, and looking down from behind the capital of a pillar, he could distinguish Lam-

bert's slim form, pacing and stopping, pacing and stopping, with arms folded and chin on fist. It was not an attitude of prayer.

He crept down into the chapel.

"Peace be with you, my son."

"Good even, father," said Lambert without turning, "is peace then a thing to be desired?"

"My son," faltered the old man, "is all well with you?"

"What mean you by well?"

"Can I aid you, my son?"

"Nay, you cannot aid. I need no aid. Yet you may pray for me."

"Shall I not pray with you, my son?"

"I am not praying." The old priest peered into the stern young face.

"Ah!" he cried, "you are tempted!"

"Is not that the lot of all men?"

"Yea. But the Spirit of evil chooses those hours which should be holiest for his most subtle assaults. Which is thy temptation, son in God? I know them all."

"That I am sure you do not, good father," said Lambert with a laugh; but since you will me to tell you, they come under the three orthodox headings. The World, of which you know naught; the Flesh, which these many years have you subdued; the Devil, whom you have never met. They are all

here, walking up and down with me. Are you not afraid ? ”

“ They have not had the victory ? ”

“ I do not know that. Father, they are very strong—very pleasant.”

“ Not so strong as prayer ! Not so strong as *He* ! ” The old man pointed to the crucifix as he spoke. “ Lambert ! My neglected son in God, confess to me. Forgive me that I left you unaided in the trials of youth, and if you forgive, let me help you now ! You are not for sin—you love it not. God will be with you—Saint Lambert will guard you. Oh ! my son, my son ! ”

Lambert, chin still in hand, looked down on the imploring little figure in the black gown, and the wrinkled good old face.

“ I will confess,” said he, “ I shall be glad to hear what holy church can offer.”

When the sun rose, and the morning breeze came dewy through the unglazed windows of the nave, and the candle-flames blinked in the sun, a blast of horns was heard from without, the doors leading to the courtyard were opened wide, and those who were about to take part in the ceremony entered.

Four heralds led the way, and a little space behind them Earl John and Earl Guilbert walked together ; John, florid, big and violent of mien ; Guilbert small,

with a small fierce wrinkled face. Following these came Lambert's two cousins, and Earl Guilbert's nephew, Miles of Brittany; behind these Lady Eleanor and Lady Maud, with a train of maidens, then more knights and as many of the household as the chapel would accommodate. Ringing of sword on spur, rustle of silk, sparkle of gem, glitter of steel, filled the space that had been so grey and still in the midnight.

No sooner were the nobles settled each in his place, than Rudolf, Abbot of York, entered from the door behind the choir, preceded by his cantor and two priests bearing the banner of Saint Lambert, which had been worked by the late countess herself. Behind his lordship followed two monks of Saint Cynebert's and two from the Abbey of the Holy Ghost, while the choir, chanting low, filed into their stalls.

Upon the altar steps, with the pomp of the world behind him, and the pomp of the world before, Lambert knelt, very still, in his russet robes.

When the monks approached him, it could be seen that they carried three other robes, and these of silk. Taking from him the rough russet, they clad him in the three silken ones. The first was white, to typify the innocency which each true knight ought to observe; the next was red, for the blood he ought to be willing to shed for his Saviour; and

the last was black, to keep him in mind of death. The robing over, mass was sung ; and the aspirant partook of the blessed host, in token of the high holiness of the office he was about to take upon him ; then the armour was brought, piece by piece for the Bishop's blessing. Here were helmet, shield, and breastplate ; but where were the knightly sword and spurs ? A murmur of voices and clatter of hoofs replied, as Wulf, bareheaded, rode in from the courtyard, carrying a new sword by the point, with a pair of gilded spurs dangling from its hilt. These also blessed, Wulf the Squire took them again, and with the other arms, delivered them to the knights and ladies whose honour it was to arm the new-created knight, who now came down from the altar and stood before them, solemn as befitted the moment.

The first to approach was his cousin, George du Bourg, who, though the younger, took precedence of his cousin germane, Roger of Shrewsbury. Sir George did on the breastplate, Sir Roger the hawk-bark, Sir Miles the belt. Then came the ladies. Lady Eleanor was tall, and as she tiptoed to place the helmet on his brows, her eyes were level with his. A fierce zeal came into her face, a determination which was one day to cost Lambert dear. She must have him for her husband, for in his keeping Bel-Forest would be safe. Never, she thought, had she

seen a sterner glance in all the warrior faces she had looked into.

Lady Maud, kneeling to the spurs, trembled and fumbled and turned up soft eyes, but he cast not so much as a look at her. Fumble as she might, at last it was over, the trumpets sounded again, and Sir Guilbert summoned him.

“Avancez, chevalier, à nom de Dieu !”

Lambert advanced and knelt, and the earl smote him thrice, twice upon the neck with his open hand, and once upon the shoulder with the flat of his sword, with the words.

“Je te fais chevalier à nom de Dieu et de mon Seigneur Saint George, pour la foy et justice loyallyment garder et l’église, femes, veuves et orphelins defender.”

Then he raised him, saying—

“Soyez preux, hardi, et loyal,” and kissed him upon both cheeks, calling him Sir Lambert, son-in-arms.

Thus, with flourish of trumpets, the sacred ceremony was over.

During the arming Wulf had led away his own horse, and now he returned, bringing with him the great grey steed Beaugris, which the earl had had in training at Fort-Castle ever since he was foaled ready for this hour. Armed and caparisoned, Wulf now led him to the step of the altar, and Lambert

leapt to his back, rode him round the chapel amid shouts and cheering, and thence into the courtyard.

Near the door, among those who did him reverence, were two men, one middle-aged, with a shrewd kind face, and one young with handsome features marred by a jealous scowl. Them Lambert saw as part of the throng, and him they could not see at all, since the aventaille of his helmet was down.

When Pargeter returned, they were met by the girls, who demanded a full account of all that had taken place.

"Did you not see the knighting?" cried Jehane, much disappointed, "What then have you been doing ever since daybreak? What was the first thing you did when you got to the castle?"

"What a seeking child it is! First we came to the tilting-field."

"Who was there beside?"

"Everyone that could walk. Monks, serfs, women, knights, fishers, freemen, villeins—all the neighbourhood. Among the throng, an old forester and a tanner."

"Saw you the earl?"

"Saw you Lord Lambert?"

"The Earl came forth to us with a stream of gentles, and Sir Guilbert among them. Some won—

dered that the young Lord was not at his father's side. They had not all the excuse little maids have for being ignorant that a man on the eve of his knighting is no more to be seen of the throng than a maid before her wedding."

"But though we did not see him, we heard fine tales about him," said Edwy, "they say he has been roaming the woods in disguise these three weeks, ashamed to show his face, and that his doings in Normandy have been such that he is not fit company for honest men. Has learned somewhat over the water, it seems!"

"You speak so learnedly yourself, Edwy, that of sooth I hardly understand you," said Jehane, soft as a mouse, "what is this that Lord Lambert has learned in Normandy?"

"I only speak as I hear."

"Say as you see, and your ears will not tingle," said Ursula.

"Tingling from cuffs, the proverb means, does it not?" said Jehane. "But tell us what *you* heard and saw, father, that will be worth listening to. What did the earl when he came into the tilting-field?"

"He spoke shortly enough, as his way is. He said he was minded to lay some of his cares on younger shoulders, and so bestowed on his son the new castle of Gubenhale, with the manor of Blackiston for a

dwelling in time of peace. And he bad those of us who would now be his son's vassals, to be obedient, since those who were not he would see to the punishing of when his son had done with them. Then we all shouted hale to the Earl and hale to the young lord, and so went with the press to the courtyard. We should have squeezed into the chapel if I had not valued my ribs overmuch."

"Then you did not see Lord Lambert at all?"

"Only as he rode out. A gallant lad he seems, and for sure had a clever horse, since in all the throng there was but one gravely hurt, and he a fool that knew not how to keep from under."

"What mean these blows, this accolade, as they call it in their jargon?" asked Edwy.

"They are the last blows the new knight may receive without resentment or requital. A man had best be respectful to knights, new or old."

"They ask others as good as they to take their blows without requital, these foreigners."

"'Tis well to love thine own race, son Edwy, but not so well to gird at those that have done you no wrong."

"How was he dressed, father?" asked Ursula.

"In his arms, child, to be sure, and over them his cloak of white samite, and short, of the fashion the king has brought into court. It was fastened across his breast with a great brooch, and was broidered

with the device of his house, a thing, so Wulf tells me, new even among the Normans."

"What mean you by a device, father?"

"A picture or words or both, on shield and helm, for them to know their friends from their foes when they are locked up in their arms as like one to another as so many kettles. The Fort-Castels use a castle keep, and beneath it the word *teneo*, which, so father Giles tells me, is in good English. 'I keep.'"

"God grant he may keep his vows; small risk he will keep his gear."

"What grudge have you against Lord Lambert?" asked Ursula, "you know naught of him."

"He is a foreigner."

"Try to be less of a fool, son Edwy," said the Woodward, "to speak of naught else, where should we all be if there were no Lords Marchers to keep the Welsh at bay. You have never seen hell let loose over the border, or you would know there are worse things than Normans."

"Go on, father, tell us more," said Ursula, "after the knighting, what next?"

"After prayers, feast. Peacock, boar's head, and outlandish meats for the great folk, honest pig for us. Wine, hippocras, strong ale, mead and cider, enough and too much. Minstrels with Welsh harps, gleemen, tumblers, jugglers. Edwy here is envious of their slight of hand."

"A lesson or two would do you good, would it not, Edwy, in case you should one day have to handle brooches?" said Jehane.

Edwy growled under his breath at this rallying, being in a dark and troubled mood. Jehane took no heed. She had listened to the account her father had given of the festivities with sparkling eyes, hugging her superiority. It was her doing—she had brought together that great assembly, though none of them knew it. It was all hers, the knighting, the feast, the white samite (how well white samite would become him!) It was she who had given him Gubenhale and Blackiston; she who had brought the great abbot from York and the greater Sir Guilbert from court at Winchester. How charming it was! She had to turn away her face to conceal the smiles of triumph she could not repress.

Yet she knew, and relished the present the more for the knowledge, that trouble was coming.

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CHAPTER VI

STORM

THE next day dawned with more than the gloom natural to a day following festivity, and every hour seemed to blow a fresh cloud across the family sky.

Edwy had brought one cloud, and in private conversation had transferred to the Woodward a portion of its gloom. Then Ursula, walking in the garden with her father, gathered a large rainy cloud all her own, while Edwy refused to impart the least information to the inquisitive Jehane.

After equally unsuccessful attempts to learn something from her father or from Ursula, Jehane, repulsed on all hands, piqued, and weary of such November weather, took her work and set off alone towards Wolferlow.

It was a sultry afternoon, but on Wolferlow there is always a breeze to moderate the heat, even of the most thunderous day ; a breeze that has spirit to sing when the valleys below can hardly sigh for languor. Jehane stood on the clean slippery pine-

needles, in the scented air, feeling the hill-breath, looking out over the familiar scene.

The descent before her was rocky, and the gorse in the interstices threw up its almond scent to mingle with the spice of the wild thyme. Around, under a wide horizon, lay the great forest under a great sky. Towards the west rose the ridge of Clee, the waves of woodland assailing its bare height like climbing sea-billows, while between hill and wood stood the castle, with the village huts clinging to its walls. A space away was a white spot, the Convent of Saint Mary, and beyond the Clee Hills, a vision of silver grey, rose the mountains of Wales. To the Southward, downstream, might be seen the towers of Gubenhale, looking across the ford that is called the ford of the Lax for the multitude of salmon that leap in its shallow waters.

There it spread, over highland and lowland, like a mantle of Utrecht velvet, the moving pattern of summer clouds passing slowly hither and thither ; spread beautiful and treacherous, brooding over its secrets, hiding dead men and their murderers, holding up its myriad sweet leaves to the summer sun and rain.

In the high afternoon it appeared a level plain, but when the declining sun struck slantways it showed its valleys where streams ran, its marshes and rocks, its hills, so old as to be almost dead of age.

Jehane had brought out a strip of embroidery she was working for Ursula's wedding-gown, and finding a seat beneath an ancient pine, sat down with an air of sober diligence and threaded her needle.

But it was warm, she tired with her climb, and sad. Ursula's tears, the first she had known her to shed since childhood, had touched her, and the mystery beneath them was frightening. So, saying to herself that the light was overbright for fine needle-work, she put it away, looked sky-ward through the soaring pine-stems over the forest, sighed, yawned, and finally curled up upon the pine-needles, pillowed by the gentle curve where a root swelled the turf.

She was lonely and apprehensive, and the forest, ever in sympathy with sorrow, was powerful to lull and comfort its child. The pines bent their heads to cast a deeper shadow where she lay ; their scent fell all about her, more soothing and hallowing than the cloud from the holy censers ; their song, mysterious and exultant, took on a gentler tone ; and such airs as rose from the outstretch of woodland and circled between their stems, stirred her hair so gently that it was like a mother's hand, like an elder sister's motherly caress. Jehane dropped asleep, her dark eyelashes wet on her cheeks.

The close-ranked oaks that girdled the pine-grove moved and rustled, as they always move and rustle. An hour passed. The sun seemed to hasten in his

going down the sky, while the clouds and their shadows still moved to and fro. There was the cracking of a twig ; a frightened magpie flew by with a harsh scream, and Jehane woke.

She sighed, yawned, and stretched out a lazy hand, playing with the pine-cones ; then sat up quickly, for her hand had encountered something that was not a pine-cone, nor indeed anything that grows by nature in a forest. It was a little parcel, wrapped in parchment, and tied with a strand of silk.

She untied it, and her sorrowful sleepy face bloomed into interest. There was a shred of purple satin, a fragment of golden moss, and a tiny square of vellum on which was drawn a diagram of the setting sun. It was a letter, sweetly mysterious and yet how easy to understand.

Lord Lambert could write, Jehane herself could read, but how much more graceful was this than any written message. All need for secrecy was over to be sure, and there was no reason why, if he wished to see her, he should not ride up to her father's door ; but it was a charming delicacy, worthy of her idea of him, that he should leave it to her to be the first to break the seal of their harmless intrigue, and let it end where it had begun, between the singing brooks.

She had expected that he would take the first

opportunity to repay what he had borrowed of her, but the manner was a delight and a surprise. She looked this way and that, in case the messenger who had brought the packet should be waiting near for his answer; but no one was in sight. That did not prove much, where a dozen men might have been hidden within stone's throw. Still, as there was no use in looking for one who did not wish to be seen, she put the letter in her pocket and took up her work, feeling revived in spirits and ready to laugh with a yaffil who was rejoicing over his own foreknowledge of rain in a thicket across the river.

Smiling often, she worked through a quiet hour; for when Jehane had a choice between pleasant and unpleasant thoughts she chose the pleasant ones.

The valleys were beginning to show as lakes of shadow, and she was thinking it was time to go home, when she heard a footstep.

Her first idea was that the letter-bringer had come for his reply, but second thoughts made it plain that one who had before been so stealthy was little likely to be heavy-footed as was the new-comer. Presently Edwy came up a pathway and strolled thoughtfully among the trees.

Jehane wondered whether she should conceal herself and let him pass, for evidently he too had

come to Wolferlow for solitude ; but her anxiety to fathom the mystery of the trouble at the dwelling overpowered such delicate considerations, and she threw a pine-cone at him.

There was nothing that Edwy desired less in the world at that moment than speech with Jehane, but when, in response to a smart tap between the shoulders he turned and saw her facing him with another cone in her hand and a naughty laugh upon her lips, he had no choice but to cross the grove towards her.

“So you are here !”

“Why do you say things like that ? I could not throw cones at you if I were *not* here, could I ? You are *enough* to make Ursula cry ! But never mind, it is true I am here, and so are you, so you can sit down and talk instead of standing over me like a great tree and telling me I am here.”

Edwy obeyed, as to a certain point a slow man does obey an imperative girl.

“Now tell me,” she said, “what all these frowns are about. What have you been doing to anger them ?”

The idea had dawned upon her that he had been confessing to some misdemeanour, probably fighting, and that her father had been severe with him ; so she wanted to play the consoler and tell the

culprit to be of good cheer, since all storms blow over with time.

"Whom have you been cudgelling of late? No one? Nor dicing? Nor flouting a good pardoner? Nor forgetting your manners at the castle?"

"Ask the others."

"I wouldn't be such a coward if I were you! Come, confess! Are you so much afraid of my displeasure? I should have thought it would not have counted for much after father and Ursula's."

"It is but this," he said sullenly, "that I asked your father's permission to delay my wedding until Yule is past."

"Why?"

The question was not easy to evade. Edwy picked up pine-needles and sorted them in sizes; gathered up his feet as though to rise and escape; tried to look his youthful questioner in the face, and failed; then stared at nothing in great discomfort.

"Why do you wish to delay wedding with Ursula until Yule is passed?"

At this repetition Edwy really gained his feet and would have fled, had not the word 'coward' sounded softly from Jehane's lips, and held him by its truth. Cowardly he felt, and cowardlike stumbled in his speech.

"I thought you would understand ; your father does not. It is my respect for your sister that makes me—makes me fearful—fearful of wronging her by haste."

"Explain some more," said Jehane, coldly. "I am slow of understanding."

"A man should be settled and firm in his mind before he weds. Do you not know that a man cannot always make himself—what he would like to be ? "

Not at all impressed, Jehane's only reply was a fresh question.

"Do you mean that you are not quite sure whether you want to marry Ursula after all, and that you desire her to wait patiently until you have made up your mind ? "

"What does it serve, speaking so ? " cried Edwy, shocked and exasperated by this naked truth.

"If that is not your reason, what is it ? "

"I am far too fond of your sister, I have too much respect for her, to wish to—to give her anything but the—the best a man has. I should be ashamed to—to——"

"To offer her half a heart ? Yes, so you should be ! Who has the rest of it ? Some lady in Clee, I suppose. I am sure I do not want to know her name ! And you are not quite sure which you

like best, so out of pure respect and affection you ask Ursula to wait while you make comparisons at leisure. And Ursula and father are not pleased with you! That is strange! May I ask when your great heart split in two? Was it in this condition when you swore your betrothal vows before us all?"

Edwy made no reply.

"That is yes, for you would deny it if you could. Have you told that to father and Ursula?"

"They did not ask me."

"I suppose you are waiting now to know whether father will allow you time for comparisons, or whether he recalls his consent altogether. Well, Edwy, I thought you were quite different from this. I hope I shall never see your face again. I am very ignorant of the world no doubt, for I did not know there were men like you in it."

"You will not understand. I have tried all through to do what is best and right."

"I wonder what your deeds are when you make no especial effort to do what is best and right! Console yourself! Ursula will find a *man* to wed her; while you—you will find something to suit you no doubt if you try."

"If you knew more of the world and of men's hearts you would not rail at me so. I am most miserable."

"I hope you are. You should be the most miserable man alive if I could make you so! Yes, begone! I shall not return until the house is free of you. I told you once I liked you not. Now I hate you. I did not know before what hate might be!"

Under the lash of her tongue Edwy at last picked up some manhood.

"Ah, Jehane," he said with a look she could not translate, "you know little indeed of men, or you would speak less unkindly. I have been foolish and wrong, but may the mother of God grant you never meet with a worse than I!"

He walked away, Jehane's bitter laugh following him.

"Amen, Amen to that!" she called.

As soon as she was alone she began to shake with that inward agitation which comes of hate alone; but though she paled and trembled there was a fierce joy in her veins. For if not, to most of us, so sweet as love, hate has the charm of strength, of swift rushing power that asks no leave before it captures us and whirls us, blind with speed, to unknown worlds of feeling. So long as it holds us we are stronger than ourselves, since we have the power of devils in us, and for weak humanity power is a joy in itself. Until the speed abates,

and our moral sense can breathe and speak, there is charm in hate.

This was the first time Jehane had seen one she loved seriously wronged. She felt no temptation now to smite Edwy, as she had when her own affection and pride were hurt ; her present wrath was too deep to be so assuaged ; but she longed to make him suffer. She wished that each one of Ursula's tears had been a drop of molten metal to fall on him.

The weather had changed. The wind had backed easterly, and the music of the pines had changed to a theme shriller and less happy ; a sycamore lifted its comely masses of foliage as though the wind were blowing from earthward ; and the sun, now very near his setting, was obscured by a dry mist which robbed his light and drew a colourless veil over all the forest.

Jehane, in the tumult of her emotions, heeded the change little. She only saw that evening had come, and unless she hastened she would be late for her meeting with Lord Lambert.

CHAPTER VII

TWILIGHT

THE quickest way for Jehane to reach Shadrachs was to go round by the dwelling and get Prince. This she decided to do, caring little if she were seen. None, she was sure, would that evening, stay to ask her her doings.

Whirled by her passion of wrath, she ran down the steep side of the hill, regardless of paths, leaping bramble and stream, lightly clambering the steep banks. Having reached the house, she whistled the pony, mounted, and trotted him down the path in the twilight. Suddenly, as she rode, a storm of tears came over her; not one of those April storms that wash away emotion, but something more akin to the rain that beats down between one burst of tempest and the next. She sat carelessly, letting Prince pick his way as he would, her tears falling on his neck. It would be time enough to stop crying, she thought, when she came to the Ride, since not until that was crossed would she be in sight from Shadrachs.

But as she left the bridle-path Prince started, a blackbird flew out with a scream, and she heard herself addressed.

"Why, what ails my little champion? My beautiful child, why are you weeping?"

"I—I am not weeping!" said Jehane, looking up vaguely, one tear on her lashes and another hanging on her chin. Through the watery mist she saw a tall grey charger, brightly caparisoned, and from its back Lambert looked down on her, kind, imperative, and lordly. He dismounted, so that their faces were on a level, for she kept her careless seat, and hastily got rid of the obtrusive tears.

"What a beautiful horse," she cried, blinking them down, "how fast he must be able to trot with those long legs! A better pace than my poor little Prince's! Yet I do not suppose he knows how to kneel to you. But I forget myself! I ought to kneel to the Lord of Gubenhale!"

She had talked herself to laughter, and laughing, slipped to the ground and knelt.

"Nonsense, little maid," said Lambert, "rise! That is better. Now tell me what ails you. Have they scolded you for meeting me in the woods? Or if not, what else? I must aid you; 'tis my turn now to be champion. Why did you weep?"

"Oh—that? I wept because being only a maid they would not take me to the castle to see you knighted—or something else—I forget."

He waived the question courteously, saying—

"I have come to pay my debts. Here is your gold collar again, and you will like it none the less, I trust, that a new gold cross hangs from it. Here is your ring, and here your gold coins in a new bag, for your own I lost."

Jehane's eyes sparkled at sight of the exquisite little pouch of kid, embroidered with gold thread, which he put in her hand.

"Oh, how beautiful," she cried, "and how envious I will make Ursula! She thinks her own needlework the best in the world, and 'tis cobbling beside this."

Lambert was glad to see that the gifts had turned her thoughts from their tearful channel, for he was in a happy mood himself.

"That is but a bare payment of what I borrowed. Now for all you did and all you so bravely risked for me, what will you in return? To the half of my kingdom, the promise ran. What shall it be?"

Jehane coloured crimson, then was paler than her wont.

"I do not want the half of your kingdom, nor any of it, my Lord," she said slowly.

"What then? Horse or hound? Jewels? Silks?"

"I wish for none of those things, my Lord."

"You must be the only maid in Christendom that does not! Something you must desire, else were you outside humanity. Come, speak, little comrade, and fear not."

"I would borrow your sword," she said, looking at him.

"My sword?"

"Yes. And with it—your right arm. Kill Edwy."

He thought this merely a pretty play to attract him.

"Fie, fie! Little maids should not talk of killing!"

Jehane looked at him indignantly.

"See you the squirrel on the branch of the oak there, my Lord? If you catch and hurt him he bites you, but his little teeth scarce draw blood, and you laugh at his puny vengeance. But catch you an adder—look at that new-shed one on his way to the brook—he bites, also, and of his bite you die. Yet bethink you; the squirrel may hate as keenly as the adder, and a maid who is helpless as a squirrel may wish to beg—or borrow—a sword to bite with?"

He looked at her seriously enough now.

"How has he wronged you, this Edwy, and who is he?"

"I will tell you nothing! Your oath was without conditions! Yet is he Strong Edwy, the tanner of Clee, and it is not me that he wrongs."

"If the man deserve punishment he shall suffer. But to chastize him myself? He is my father's vassal! 'Tis impossible! Good Jesu! Would you have me murder the man?"

"Banish him, then."

"Neither can I banish him without cause."

"Then you are an oath-breaker!"

"Child, be reasonable. It would ill suit with my estate. Ask some more possible thing, and you shall have justice on this man over and above."

"I will ask no other thing. Kill, or banish for ever this Edwy."

"I cannot. Nay, by the glory of God I will not," cried the young man, hotly, "I had rather break my own foolish oath than God's command. I thought you gentler than to ask such a boon, little maid."

"And I thought you a man of honour! Ingrate! Coward! Traitor! Oh——"

She broke off with a cry of surprise, for with a crashing of brambles, Edwy broke through the

underwood, dragging his horse after him by the bridle. He gave one glance at Jehane's startled face, and then assailed Lord Lambert in vigorous Anglo-Saxon.

The Woodward and his daughters could both speak and understand the tongue of the conquerors, but Edwy knew as little of it as Lambert did of English.

To Edwy's eyes the situation explained itself. He could see Jehane with gold in her hands, talking with a finely dressed young noble at evening. It was enough! Blunt manliness defies delicate distinctions, deafens itself to entreaties and explanations. This was a case to be settled in true manly fashion, off hand.

Lambert looked to Jehane to interpret her countryman's excitement; but she refused the office of interpreter. Edwy was telling the Norman in frankest phrase to go back to his own ladies, and leave the chaster daughters of his vassals to men of their own race. Instead of translating, she entreated Edwy to cease from his foolish brawling, explained that she did not want his championship; told him that the noble had done no wrong to anyone, and that, in fine, he, Edwy, was making a great fool of himself.

Taking no heed of her, and getting no reply from Lambert, Edwy, half blind with rage, struck him

a sounding blow with his fist, and drew his sword.

There was a moment's silence, Edwy tugging at the buckle of his cloak. The young knight's mouth twitched, his eyes flashed, but he disdained to speak to such an adversary, and only said coldly to Jehane,

"I will give orders for his punishment, if this is the man you spoke of. But first for your pleasure I will chastize him."

Throwing off his mantle, he drew but just in time to parry the other's onslaught.

Such encounters have been often described; the muscular but unskilled fighter helpless before the skilled swordsman, who bides his time to wound, disarm or slay accordingly to his nature or his mood.

Edwy fought angrily, with pushed-out lips and noisy breath, using the old cuts and wards every boy learned. Lambert, it seemed, but half-heartedly, touching the other's sword this way or that as easily as a girl puts aside a flowering spray, ready at any moment to make an end.

Jehane, matters thus taken out of her hand, stood aside as she was bidden, cowed and frightened. She had seen apprentices brawling in Clee, and woodmen arbitrating with bare fists, but never the life-and-death meeting of swords; the hiss of them made her face cold as a sword itself.

It seemed to her long, though it was in reality but a few moments, ere Lambert's point, after

hovering like a bee over several parts of Edwys' person, entered near the arm-pit, and the blood flowed.

"Oh, spare him!" she cried, "I do not want him hurt! Pray spare him!"

"I have no wish to kill the fool," said Lambert coldly, "but he is so violent."

For the moment she was reassured. But presently, watching Edwy's face grow pale and his eyelids droop, she could bear it no longer. She forgot all her wrath and scorn, and saw in him only the old playfellow, her childhood's prince of romance. When, taking a cut across the wrist, he twisted with the pain, she darted forward between the combatants. Lambert's point, which was about to wrest the weapon from Edwy's weakening grasp, was knocked aside, while Edwy, tripping, lunged forward, his point at Lambert's breast, and they fell together, heavily. Between their bodies Edwy's sword was broken in three.

Jehane was on her feet again instantly, and saw Edwy gather himself up, and stand with feet apart looking stupidly on his fallen foe, who lay with arms outstretched, his face very white, a little foam on his lips and a little blood on his breast where lay the fragments of Edwy's blade.

She gazed from one to the other distractedly.

"Oh, Lord Lambert!" she cried. "Edwy,

what have you done? Oh, what have you done, Edwy?"

He turned his dull troubled eyes to her.

"Lord—Lord who?"

"Lord Lambert! Did you not know him?"

"No—I knew him not!"

He staggered to the edge of the ride, sat down upon a moss-covered stone, and laid his face in his hands.

"I am a dead man," he moaned, "a dead man!"

Jehane stood between the two. She dared not look upon that still figure with the outstretched arms and the blood upon its breast, and what could she do for Edwy? She might bind his wound to be sure, but would that after all be any kindness? Would it not be best to let him die quietly here and now? It is something to die in peace, and if he were taken he would pay dearly for a day or two more of life. Rumour spoke aloud of the old Earl's cruelty, and that was much in a day when even sheriff's courts dealt out punishments we, of the new humanity, do not care to speak of.

So she stood wondering what to do, circumstances being too difficult for her. As she hesitated, she noticed that Edwy was looking past her with the eyes of one who sees the spectre of the man he has slain. She turned and there was Lambert,

pallid still and leaning on his sword, but neither dead nor dying, and looking upon his late adversary with a somewhat grim smile.

He turned to Jehane, and spoke, drawing his breath uneasily.

"He had better begone until my father's wrath be cooled. Unless you have changed your mind again and wish him dead."

"You are sore hurt, my Lord!" faltered Jehane.

"Not mortally, as by rights I should be—had not Saint Lambert of Utrecht himself been my guard. The wound is naught—the point broke on my breastbone—but yon ox's weight on my ribs. If you would have him live, get him over the river—your shoulder while I mount, my maid!"

Jehane aided him in his painful getting to horse.

"Oh, you are good, my lord! I was wrong—I will do your bidding. But—*must* you tell the Earl that 'twas poor Edwy hurt you?"

"It does not rest with me—one of our men is now on his way with the news—I saw him as we fought. No, get him over the water—'tis his only chance—look not so pitifully, he has only lost blood—my point is not wholly disobedient. Luckily for him here comes the rain, and perchance in a few days—it will be safe for him to return."

"Oh, you are good, my Lord," sobbed Jehane,

" 'tis all my fault that you are both hurt, and poor Edwy in such danger beside—all my fault ! "

" 'Twas yon groaning ox's fault, not yours. Yet 'tis ever best to let men fight it out, my dear. "

Then she wept again, and said again,

" You are good, my lord. God go with you and heal you ! I will do your bidding ! "

For all the pain in which he rode, Lambert carried with him a clear picture of that tearful face, still younger in its penitence and fear than it had been in its glowing gaiety or its bright wrath.

CHAPTER VIII

PERIL

NOW that Jehane was left alone to follow Lambert's advice, the emotions which had been distracting her fled, as did her tears, leaving her clear-headed. She returned to Edwy, who had not moved from his attitude of dejection.

"You heard what he said. You must hasten for the river. I will bind your wound, it has nearly stopped bleeding."

"I am a dead man," he groaned without stirring, "get you home, Jehane."

Edwy was one of those men who are constructed to run on an accustomed track, and there alone are reliable. Astray, they are among the most unmanageable of forces. Circumstances had driven Edwy from his track, and now, deprived of his physical strength, all that remained of his manhood was a mulish obstinacy and a misguided carefulness for Jehane.

In vain she entreated him to bestir himself; in vain held before him the terrible consequences of waiting to be captured; in vain taunted him,

calling him coward, ox, lump; in vain adjured him for his parent's sake, for Ursula's sake, for the sake of the hypothetical lady in Clee, to make for the river and save himself. To all the only response she received was "Begone, Jehane, 'tis too late for you to be abroad," and a deeper bowing of his head in his hands.

Under ordinary circumstances she would have pitied his plight, but her powerlessness to move the helpless bulk before her, roused anger instead, intensified by each failure. Almost she was tempted to leave him to his fate. But she thought of Ursula; thought of the castle-yard, and Earl John looking on while his men did his bidding on Edwy's body; thought again of Ursula.

She would save him in spite of himself, and in despite of her own pride. Since he acted like a child, she would treat him like one. So she knelt by him where he sat, laying her cheek to his.

"Edwy, dear Edwy," she whispered, "bestir yourself for my sake—be not so unkind! You liked me before I was cross, yet now you will not do a single thing I ask! You are keeping me here where the Earl's men will find me, though you know how I hate men-at-arms and their jests. As for going home without you, 'tis folly to talk of it. A pretty welcome I should have from father and Ursula when I told them I had left you

in the forest alone, wounded and in peril! You are selfish and cruel! Yes, cruel to me, Edwy!"

"Cruel? To you? No—that shall not be—what is it you would have me do?"

"I would have you mount your horse first of all," she said, kissing him in her gratitude, "now be good, Edwy, for my sake!"

He stumbled to his feet, and his horse being at hand, he scrambled into the saddle without further ado, saying,

"Now you can go home!"

Jehane whistled Prince, and before Edwy had found his stirrups she was beside him, leading his horse south along the ride.

"You said if I mounted you would go home!" he reproached her.

"I but take you to the cross-rides—mind your head against those branches!"

Presently, when the cross-rides were past, he summoned determination to protest again.

"I must go as far as the Hollow-way now," replied Jehane, "I cannot take the bridle-paths in the dark!"

So on they went, on down the river-ride in the gathering dark, while the rain increased from silent weeping to pattering, and from pattering to an unbroken hiss. There was small fear of their meeting other wayfarers, for even the most reckless

is chary of risking an encounter with the powers of evil which haunt the thick woods after nightfall.

For such terrors they themselves had little place ; Edwy was faint with loss of blood, and dazed from the awful moment when he had thought the Lord of Gubenhale dead at his hands, and the rope knotting for his neck. As for Jehane, her hands were full, and overfull.

It is not an easy task at any time to ride a pony and lead a horse ; and in addition to the ordinary embarrassments of such a position, Edwy's horse was nervous, shying at the black shapes of bushes and stones which seemed to move towards them out of the leaf-choked darkness with which they were bewalled. Each start or sidle menaced the rider's unsteady seat. There were steep, slimy pitches to be descended ; brooks to be crossed which Prince had a desire to leap ; boggy places through which Edwy's horse had to be dragged by the bridle ; narrow places where Jehane must loose him and ride behind ; and all the while she was wondering why Lord Lambert had said that it was lucky the rain was coming, and why he had told her to get the fugitive over the river. Why had he not suggested the Holy House at Clee ? Perchance because it was too near the castle. But then there was Bridgnorth Liberty, or the Sanctuary of Saint Giles—both secure for those who fled the law.

The place for which they were making, the nearest point at which the river could be crossed, was as much in the Earl's jurisdiction as the place where the fight had taken place, and though they were on their way for the minster of Saint Cynebert, that was greatly too far to reach.

It was not until the rush of the ford mingled with the rush of the rain, that she understood, and drew up, frightened.

When the horses checked in the splashy mud of the landing, and Edwy, aroused, repeated once more,

"Get you home, Jehane. I stir not till you leave me!" She hushed him brusquely.

"Do not talk. Listen!" Then he, too, heard the baying of leashed hounds.

"Now at last you will cease telling me to go home! Hush, I am thinking!"

She was still a moment; then dismounted.

"I know. You must ride Prince. Give me your cloak."

"I—I will not—why?"

"To save your life and mine, if it may be. Edwy! will you kill me because you are so slow of understanding? Do you hate me? There is no time to lose! For my sake get off! For my sake, Edwy!"

Again at that appeal he did her bidding.

"Give me your cloak," she said, and took it without leave, "Bah! Wet with blood! But so much the better!"

She twisted it by the hem in the stirrup of Edwy's horse, then turning his head up a path to the right, with a sharp blow, sent him off at a trot.

This would divide the scent, and though they might be traced to the ford, their pursuers could not know for certain that they had crossed it. The dogs would follow Edwy's horse, for there are limits to the sagacity of sleuth-hounds.

Now must come the fording, and that was a serious matter. The Ford of Fools is not deep, but it is very, very swift, so that if a man loses his footing there, be he swimmer or no, he is never buried on dry ground.

The ford shimmered before them plain to distinguish. Grey deep river above, grey deep river below, and the ford a pale line, joining black forest to black forest, rushing over its impeding stones in such wise that if a man missed but one stone he was gone.

Prince's fearlessness, one of his many virtues, stood them now in good stead. He sniffed and blew at the water, and stamped in it; but once started, he was sure-footed as a cat, and gave himself to Jehane's guiding loyally, though he let her understand his rooted objection to so heavy

a weight, and the swaying of long and helpless legs. For Edwy was almost spent, and as the roaring water swept under him, he closed his eyes and reeled in the saddle.

Slowly, from stone to stone, each step a peril, they neared the eastern bank; but even then Jehane would not land at once, lest, crossing the ford at a venture, their pursuers should pick up the scent on the other side. So she led the reluctant pony twenty yards upstream in the backwater, and not until she had reached the muddy track by which the deer and wild oxen came to drink, and Saint Cynebert's swine at shacking-time, did she allow him to land. It was dead dark, the path unknown and heavy going; but they must at least get out of sight from the river.

"A little further—just a little further!" urged Jehane, rather to Prince than to his rider; for Edwy's arms were round the pony's neck, and words were lost upon him. A very little way, and he slid to the ground swooning, and there lay.

Prince looked at him, shook himself from ears to tail, and walked away in dudgeon; never had a rider left him in such style before.

So here was an end of their journey. The river was crossed, the dogs, she hoped, eluded; but what then? There lay her charge, dinting the clay with his weight.

Jehane was not, like Ursula, one who had loved to help the firmness in charge of the hospital. She knew little of the care of the sick ; but it needed no experience to guess that a bed of soaking herbage and a coverlet of rain were unwholesome for a wounded and exhausted man. His stillness and his cold face frightened her ; yet she could do no more for him. The dogs might come, savage beasts might come to the scent of blood ; death in one form or another would very likely be the lot of both before morning ; but she could do no more, and with a sudden realization of weariness, and a deep shiver as the heat of the struggle died out of her tired bones, she stretched her arms over Edwy's unconscious form, laid her head down between them, and prayed to our Mighty Lady Saint Mary of Clee to save her servants in their deadly peril.

CHAPTER IX

A BROKEN SWORD

WHILE Lambert was fighting with Edwy, the tanner, the Woodward sat in his house, his face carved as stone to acceptance of the unavoidable. Ursula looked even more like her father than usual. Stony one could not call a face so soft and young ; it was more like that exquisite translucent marble which is of all inanimate things the most like human flesh.

As the evening drew dimmer, and the blazing branches on the hearth gave out more light than the dying day, Ursula broke the silence.

Neither had spoken since Edwy had ridden off, gone for the first time without cheerful words of speeding, without message or gift, handfasting or kiss, without promise of a quick return. Gone, as both were thinking, never to return again.

It is hard to say which was suffering most. Ursula was the betrothed ; but the Woodward loved his daughter dearly, so that her pain was his, and Edwy had been as his son ; besides it is very difficult for a strong man to acquiesce.

"Father."

"My daughter."

"You are right, father. My will is as yours. Yet—think as well of him as you can. Perhaps—a man may sometimes be unable to—to be constant. It would have been so much worse if he had not told us what he has told us. Father—I pity a divided heart."

"I despise a weak will and a double tongue," said Pargeter, "Where is Jehane?"

Ursula started.

"Jehane? I know not. She cannot be out so late as this! I had forgotten her—how wicked of me! She must be at the cottage."

But Jehane was not at the cottage.

"You told her nothing?"

"Nothing. It was cruel—I see that now."

"It is possible she has gone to intercept Edwy, to find out from him what she should have learned from us. I will ride in that direction."

Ursula, left alone in the dwelling, laid fresh logs on the fire, for it was raining, and Jehane would be wet; set a light in the window for Jehane to see; set a cup of cordial to warm upon the hearth, and parted the curtains of their bed-place for the warmth to enter, for Jehane would be tired, and the tired are chilly. Lastly, when all was in order, she kneeled before the little shrine in the corner

with its wooden Lady in her blue silk cloak, and prayed.

It was late when Pargeter returned, and he did not come alone. One of the Earl's men entered with him, and another stood at the door with a dog which strained at his cord and sniffed. All were dripping with rain, and Pargeter's face was stony as ever.

"These are from the castle, Ursula," said he, "they are looking for Edwy, and they think we are hiding him here. I tell them he left before dark and is probably at home in Clee by this."

"What do they want with him, father?"

"They tell me that Lord Lambert has been attacked in the forest, and this fool here thinks it was Edwy he saw at blows with him. I ask him why, in that case, he left his master, and he replies that he is no brawler. He should have said he is a hare-livered craven."

"Why do you think that 'twas Edwy you saw?" asked Ursula of the henchman.

"There's not another so big 'twixt Clee and Bridgnorth," growled the man, "though I couldn't be right sure," he added as he caught the Woodward's stern eye.

"You did not see his face then?"

"'Twas he I tell you."

"Are you the man he cudgelled for insolence last Martin's feast?"

"If 'twasn't he 'twas nobody."

"You saw none but the two?" asked Ursula.

"'Twas all was needed. Don't try and prevent us doing according to the Earl's orders, Woodward, for he's enough to fright the moon out of the sky."

"Is it within your orders to close the door?" said Ursula, "the rain drives in."

The men ransacked the house, running their knives through the thatch and tearing up the boards. They were not unwilling to prolong their task, and the Woodward was as careful of their comfort as if he had loved them, putting before them ale and cakes, detaining them on this pretext and that, until they were roused by the horn of the head-borough summoning the searchers.

At last father and daughter were alone in the disordered dwelling. Ursula put things within to rights while Pargeter went round the outbuildings.

"We can speak now," he said when he returned, "there is no one either at shutter or thatch. They are gone—may the rain drown the brutes!"

"Think you there can be truth in what they say, that Edwy fought with Lord Lambert? He spoke evil of the barons last eve, but with the young lord

he can have no quarrel ; he has not seen him save at the knighting."

" I might believe they fought, but hardly in Edwy having the better. It were about as likely as that my spaniel Toby should outrace one of the castle greyhounds."

" You think the man was mistaken then, father ? "

For reply Pargeter twisted round the pouch that hung between his shoulders, and drew from it the hilt of Edwy's sword.

" Now you know as much as I do," he said, laying it upon the table.

Ursula turned pale. A broken sword is terribly eloquent.

" They say that Lord Lambert is hurt to the death, and the Earl foaming mad with rage. He threatens to hang two at least of his men if they have not brought him the culprit by to-morrow eve. The forest is being searched yard by yard. I went with that coward and the others to the place where he saw the fight, and I stood upon *this* while they searched with lanterns and found only the bits of blade that might be any man's. So all their story rests on is that fool's word that 'twas Edwy he saw. Let us hope he will be one of the first the Earl will hang."

" Let us rather thank the saints for your dear eyes that see in the dark," said Ursula, taking the muddy

sword-hilt which could have told so much, "but what says Lord Lambert himself about it?"

"They knew nothing of that. Meseems he was unwilling or unable to tell what he knew."

The walls of the dwelling were built of pine-trunks, lined with oak-planking. Between the walls and the thatch of furze was room to insert a hand, while here and there, where a trunk was shorter than the others, was a hollow, fit to hide any small object with great security. The eyes of both sought such a place, and when the damning evidence of Edwy's guilt had been flattened beneath the Woodward's heel, it was squeezed through the open space and hidden away.

"Think you Edwy was hurt?" asked Ursula as she climbed from the settle, "and heard you aught of Jehane, father?"

"Naught. But if she or Edwy be near they will be found by morning. To-morrow the orders are to search the churches and Liberties and the lands over the river."

"Think you, father, that she might have gone to the holy sisters, being hurt in her heart that I kept my counsel from her?"

"I go thither at daybreak. Now get me to eat and drink."

Ursula did his bidding with still face and deliberate movement.

His errand to the convent was, of course, fruitless.

The holy mother had several theories to account for Jehane's disappearance——none of them of a nature to console an anxious father. Pargeter took no more heed than courtesy demanded, and after leaving a message for Jehane should she yet appear, left the convent and took the steep road for the castle.

He and his black horse were well known there, and were welcomed alike by the guard in the keep and the retainers in the courtyard. He passed the rest by, and sought out one who stood at the foot of a narrow stair, guarding it ; a man of heavy features, light blue eyes small as a pig's, a swart skin and sullen demeanour.

This man, Lambert's esquire, but called more often Wulf the Churl, was the son of villeins, Clee-born. That he was not only the personal attendant on the young Lord, but had been brought up with him almost as an equal, was due to a whim of the late countess, a woman far Earl John's superior in intelligence and refinement.

A short time before Lambert's birth she knew that her own days were numbered, and as she looked on the baby who would never know her, death gave her a glimpse into the future, and she saw her son grow up to be a man who would be loved as well as feared by the poor sons of the conquered who lived in the huts under his walls, whose lives were in his

hands, and whose very shirts were not their own, but his.

So she called good father Giles, who brought her what she asked, a little churl, both of whose parents were dead of the plague that had followed the last famine, a babe every whit as strong and well formed as the heir of Clee. The countess died before the babes knew her but her wishes were carried out ; the children grew up as brothers, learned their letters and the use of arms together, played, fought and slept together.

Had Wulf been self-seeking and supple he would have grown up a courtier ; had he been quick-witted and resolute he would have made himself a place in the rank that had adopted him ; would have risen from squirehood to knighthood, and thence—who knows ?—men have been second to kings from beginnings as lowly. But he was dull, stubborn and little liked. The old earl took his gloomy looks to betoken discretion, and thought Lambert the safer for his attendance, but he had no affection for him ; Lambert, indeed, was the only one who had. His normally high spirits were not affected by Wulf's gloomy ones, and he knew he could rest complete faith on the other's solid loyalty.

Their relationship was a curious one. One hour it was lord and vassal, the next brethren. Lambert hectored, and Wulf retorted with black looks, but

obeyed. Wulf lashed Lambert with words, and not unfrequently bruised him with fists, yet secretly longed for a chance to give his life for him. They quarrelled often, yet neither would listen to dispraise of the other, and neither cared for any other companionship so well.

Except at that low ebb of Lambert's fortunes when he first appeared in this story, and when, for lack of cash, Wulf had been left behind in Normandy, the pair had never been parted.

Wulf had no friend but Lambert, for he acquiesced in the fate which had cut him off from his own caste, and grimly refused to enter the other.

Such was the man whom Pargeter drew apart from the throng.

"What brings you here to-day of all days, Pargeter? 'Tis not safe to be within bowshot of the Earl."

"I want speech with Lord Lambert."

"That is flat impossible. He is sick abed. You must have heard what has happened."

"His wound is not mortal, I trust?"

"I trust so too; but he is in great discomfiture, and I dare admit none but his leech."

"You are yourself admitted to his chamber then, so you can carry a message. Ask if I may have speech with him on a matter of life and death. 'Tis a thing he would not thank you for keeping from him."

"Tell me your errand, and I will repeat it to him."

"Impossible, though not from lack of trust. See, you, Wulf, ask if he will see me, or if lives shall be lost by delay. He does not, like his father, count men's lives as flies. Haste, it is a matter for haste."

The castles of Lords Marchers were not designed for domestic comfort, and the young baron's chamber was a mere stone cell in the thickness of the wall. A narrow slit was all that admitted the light, and beneath it he lay on a low couch with a bearskin for covering.

The Woodward made his obeisance, Lambert watching him with somewhat impatient curiosity.

"You are my father's Woodward, I am told," he said, "What is it you want of me?"

"A tale was brought to me, sire, that your Lordship had been attacked by a young man who had lately left my house. I came to assure the Earl that I am innocent of all complicity in the matter, and to plead for the young man, whose innocence I will vouch for."

"To assure the Earl? But I am not the earl, that you should force your way to me thus."

"Pardon, my lord, but yourself alone knows the truth in this matter."

"How do you vouch for your friend's innocence?"

"Only, sire, by reasoning that he, being unskilled with the sword, cannot have injured your lordship

by any fair means, and I cannot believe him capable of foul ones."

"You ought to have been a man of law, Woodward. Is that in very truth the only errand that brought you to Clee, and into my sick-room?"

"I wished also to assure myself that the accounts I heard of your lordship's desperate condition were as untrue as I believe this accusation of Edwy to be. Forgive my intrusion, sire, but the talk of low-born men is not to be trusted."

"Speak no ill of my foster-brother!"

"I thought not of him, my lord, but of other talk, which, if it were true, I should not have sought your lordship for this or any other reason."

Lambert again looked him over with his keen blue eye, and smiled.

"They speak evil of me, do they? You are free of speech, Warden. Be a little freer. It seems a reflection on my honesty that you will not tell me the cause of your presence; but since you will not I will. What relation are you to this young man?"

"None, my lord."

"You feel for him as a father for an erring son. I know it, for I have been an erring son myself. And you come to speak a word for him if may be; but mainly you come to seek tidings of your daughter."

Pargeter was moved from his quiet demeanour.

"How should I learn aught of my daughter in an Earl's castle?"

"Nay, Warden, she has taken no hurt from any here. She is a good child, and has done for me just such a good turn as a brother-in-arms might do. You have need to be proud of her. You marvel how I know you have lost her! Hark, you, do not seek her over-cunningly, for where she is, the man Edwy is too."

Pargeter's breath came fast, and his nostrils went in and out.

"Be calm, good franklin. I would tell you the whole story if my ribs did not grudge me breath. She was present when the churl attacked me, and came between us, else had I not been so sore. The fellow had lost blood and was helpless as a boar's head on a dish; so I told the maid, as she valued his life, to get him away till my father's wrath should be somewhat overpast. It seems, does it not, that she has disposed of him cunningly, and no doubt she will keep him with cunning. It will not be for long, since as soon as I can ride my father takes me to Gubenhale to set my feet on my new estates. Till then, mind you, Warden, if you find the maid you lose the tanner, and very like the maid too, since 'tis hard to set bounds to the wolf's wrath when his cub is hurt. Few would be more loth than I that harm should come to her, though I care not so greatly for the tanner."

Under his beard Pargeter's lips moved, and he looked at the young noble as though he would have looked into his heart ; but keen as were his wits the man of alien race was beyond his reading. Lambert smiled at his perplexity.

"It is pity you are not more trustful," he said, "believe at least that you cannot think too well of your maid, she is wholesome as sunshine and chaste as Saint Agnes. The Virgin grant I may get such a daughter when my time comes. Now leave me, and remember my warning."

Wulf, anxious for news, was on the stair, but with crowns and promises, Pargeter got away.

"What think you of it ? " he asked Ursula. He rated her discretion high, or he would not have repeated his interview with Lambert, and also her intelligence, or he would not have asked her opinion. But his insight had its limit, for he tried to conceal from her that Edwy was wounded, not realizing that thereby he raised the question as to why Jehane should have accompanied his flight.

"I know naught of Lord Lambert, but from what you tell me I do not believe he lied to you. What was it he said about Jehane ? That she had done for him what a brother-in-arms might do ? Then 'twas he she spoke with in Shadrachs in the spring-time. Father, think no dark thoughts. Jehane had done no ill, and no ill will come to her. Such

as she are in the special care of the Mother of God and Holy Saint Agnes. Let us be patient until it is safe to seek both her and Edwy."

The Woodward turned away, and groaned in his distress.

"'Tis well for you," said he, manlike.

"Yes, father, well for me, and for you too, to trust in the Mighty Virgin and the saints. Have I nothing to bear? I have a thing to show you."

She led the way to the stable. There stood Edwy's horse. Returning, she drew from beneath her bed Edwy's bloodstained cloak.

The Woodward's face was wretched in its weariness, and its calm was broken; but Ursula's was beautiful.

"Let us pray to our Lady of good counsel, the Help of the afflicted," she said. So they knelt before the little Madonna in the blue cloak, and prayed, until the silence was broken by the father's cry,

"Mother of God, spare my child—my children! And bring all who wander home again!"

CHAPTER X

CORDWOOD JACK

WHEN Jehane raised her head from its bent prayer to the heavens that sent down nothing but the cruel rain, it seemed to her that the sky was somewhat less black, and for a moment she wondered if she had slept and it were dawn. Then she remembered that the moon was due to rise before midnight ; it had in fact risen, but was obscured by clouds.

From where she crouched she could see outlines of trees, and knew by this that she was on the edge of a clearing, though of what description she could not at first guess. Presently she noticed an outline which was not that of any tree, and the sight of it caused her to spring to her feet with a thrill of hope, for it was the apex of a wood-collier's cabin. The spot where Edwy had fallen was on the edge of the strip of virgin wood through which they had pushed from the river, and before them was a portion that had lately been cleared.

The cabin was a tall, wigwam-like structure of gorse, with room in it for two men as well as their tools, when the burning had to be watched by night.

Stiff with wet and weariness, Jehane stumbled towards this refuge in the uncertain light. She had no fear, for she was as certain of help and welcome as if it had been her father's house. The Earl was a great man, to be sure, with power of life and death, fine and torture, but too distant a potentate to appeal to ignorant imaginations. The effective king of the burners was the Woodwarden. There was not one among them who would not have risked his all (which was not much, truly, but included his life) for one of his master's daughters ; so too would the lumberers, but Jehane was glad it was not a lumberers' clearing she had hopped upon, for they are dull fellows, and drunken, while the collier is intelligent, and proud of his craft.

At her low but urgent call, the gorse hurdle which protected the opening of the hut was pulled away, and in the inky space a broad figure appeared, thrusting forth a head.

"I want your help," said Jehane, "Edwy the tanner is over there. The headborough and the Earl's men are after him—me too—he is wounded and in a swoon. Quick, good burner, I am Jehane !"

"Aye ? Mistress Jehane ? Saint Ninian's hair !" ejaculated he, in a series of grunts, "I should have known you by ear—your sister speaks slower—aye !"

"I should know you by 'aye,' though 'tis too

dark to see ! You are Cordwood Jack. But quick—have you no light ? ”

“ Light ? Aye, Stammering Jack might show a light to guide the Headborough—or Soaker—aye ! But Cordwood Jack is no such fool ! Show me where the man lies.”

Jehane, rejoicing in this uncouth friend, took him to Edwy, and the sturdy collier, though grumbling that no stick of timber he ever hefted was awkwarder to handle than this tanner, yet lifted him to his shoulder, and carrying him to the cabin, laid him on the heap of dry bracken which served as a bed, and this done, set about other arrangements for the safety of his fugitives.

One who had come upon him in the dark and dripping woods, shuffling hither and thither with his waddling gait, scratching his head, grunting and chuckling with self-approval, might have thought him some prowling idiot, and in that would have been greatly mistaken.

First he caught Prince, who was too tired to make much demur, and led him inside the cabin ; then took his own mule from where it was patiently dripping under a tree, and hobbled it on the exact spot where the weight of Edwy's body had made so tell-tale a dint in the wet clay ; then he searched, nose to earth, for any rag or scrap of property which might have led to betrayal.

"Aye, aye, he's not Cordwood Jack for nothing!" he muttered, as each act was accomplished to his satisfaction.

Why, as he appeared to think, the fact of his having been born under the lee of a rank of cordwood, should be taken as a warranty for his uprightness, courage, and especially his intelligence, it would be hard to say; but as so many of us try to live up to the level of quite adventitious qualities, such as fortune, rank, nation, or personal appearance, we cannot afford to smile at him with other than the smile of kinship. Besides, Cordy was almost as fine a fellow as he fancied himself.

"Aye, you have little Jehane to keep safe, and—God's Hands!—the tanner of Clee! So mind your manners, Cordy! Aye, so!" He grunted in solemn self-admonition as he crawled into the cabin, and squatting under Prince's belly, applied flint and steel to a very dim horn lantern; then, though its light was less than that of a farthing dip, he examined the hut from without, and not till he was satisfied that there was no chink through which it could be visible, did he finally return to his guests.

There was not much he could do for them, since he possessed neither food, drink or fire, but he took off Edwy's soaking garments, wrapping him in the hairy blanket which did duty for the mule by day and his master by night; then, having put his mate's

bed and blanket at Jehane's disposal, he was at the end of his resources. He looked at Edwy somewhat anxiously, but remarking that he expected a good sleep would bring him round, took off his own jacket to make Jehane a pillow, and curled himself up among Prince's feet.

"My mate Walter will be back at dawn, and meat and drink with him," he said reassuringly.

"Are we safe here, Cordy?"

"Of course you ain't, not if they tracks you and kills me, which they may do if there's more than four of them! But never you fret your heart, mistress, you wait till Walter comes, and he's a man with a head almost as good as mine, and it's odd if between the two of us we don't smell out some'ut! You trust Cordy—aye!"

"I don't believe you are telling the truth—Walter will never come at dawn. All you men are afraid of the woods at night."

"Most of us be, aye! That's true. But Walter, he was born on the Eve of All Angels, and no evil thing can't touch him. He has never even seen the Dogs, or heard them questing, nor seen the Hand! No, he has no fear, nor wouldn't I if I was him. But I wasn't born no day in particular. Ah, if our mothers would only think what a difference a day makes to a man! Did you ever hear tell of that man as was Christened on the eve of Pentecost, so as

water couldn't drown nor fire burn him? And he had an enemy, what knew about the fire and not about the water. So when he got him in his power 'twas the ordeal by water he claimed. And you know well, mistress, that when a man's guilty he swims, but if he's innocent he drowns. Now this man, being innocent, he sank as soon as they threw him into the pool, but 'stead of drowning he just lay on the bottom safe as you're laying now, and waited till the crowd was all gone home. Then he walked out of the pool and got safe over the border into Wales—aye, did he, for there's no use of being fool-hardy, and they might have took and cut his head off, and dying when your head's cut off not even the holy angels can save you from. Aye, Walter will be back by dawn, and he and I will talk it over—I'm getting thoughts now—you trust Cordy? "

So Jehane trusted, and having done hard work for a maid, fell deeply asleep on the heap of bracken under the rough blanket.

The wood-coller had asked no question as to the crime which Edwy had committed to bring the Headborough and the Earl's men both on his heels. Cordy prided himself on his good manners; and the man was his guest.

Sunshine poured through the door of the cabin, and morning wind, when Jehane woke and looked about her. Cordy was gone, Prince was gone, Edwy

was gone. Outside rose the blue smoke of a fire, and her frock, dry, was across her feet. She struggled into it, and ran out.

Over the fire a black pot was bubbling, and not far off was a pit ready for burning, while at a short distance she could see the two men hard at work upon another, turving it with their great spades as if life depended upon their speed.

"Cordy! Cordy! Where is Edwy?" cried Jehane. The man raised a reproachful finger.

"Not so loud, little mistress!"

"What are you doing? Where is Edwy? And Prince?" she asked in a lower voice.

"Did you say as you'd trust Cordy? Aye?"

"I know I did. But where have you taken him?"

"That is the question, aye? Where have we taken him? If you can't find out, reckon others can't, and that's well."

He wiped his forehead, scraped his boot on his shovel, spat, winked at Walter, who winked back at him; then, shining with self-approbation, led the way to the larger charcoal-pit, which had been built overnight.

"Aye? Thought I'd betrayed you?" he muttered, "look at that pit now—as well made as you'm like to see, an' all ready for lighting—aye?"

A charcoal pit is not a pit, but an erection the shape of a straw bee-hive. A few stakes are set in

the ground, and the cordwood, consisting of oak branches some three feet long and as thick as a man's wrist, are leaned against them, layer after layer in two tiers, until the structure is complete. With the exception of a hole in the top down which the fire is dropped, the pit is a solid mass of oak-branches, often as much as fourteen feet in diameter; completed it is covered with turf, peat, and rubbish from the forest floor, well wetted, and moveable shelters are set up to windward lest some breeze too brisk should burn through the turves and convert the good charcoal into ashes.

Cordy Jack stooped before the pit in question and pulled away a large turf. This exposed the wood and a dozen branches came away in his hand like a shutter, showing the interior. It was hollow, all the wood having been extracted except the outer walls.

"Aye, aye," chuckled Cordy, "saw you ever a pit like it? Turn to charcoal such as never was—look within, mistress, aye, stoop and look!"

Jehane knelt and peered. It was a round wooden hut, almost dark.

"You will find him in there—aye, safe enough. Take this—'twill keep you from hunger till nightfall—foreman will be here soon, belike, so get you in—there! Feed him well, and yourself too!"

Thrusting into Jehane's hands a huge flat cake of

barley bread, a lump of bacon, and a jug of broth, he hurried her through the hole.

"When we speak loud you may speak low, and when we speak low, 'twere better you held your peace," were his last instructions.

Not until she was fairly inside could she see Edwy, lying at length upon a bed of heather; his eyes, brown as wet oak-leaves in November, looked handsomer than ever in his pallid face, and he stretched out his hand, smiling feebly.

There are few women, unless they be unsexed, who can look without emotion on a strong man in his weakness. Far from being such a one, Jehane was just entering upon her glorious, troublous, heritage, knowing nothing of the pains and pleasures to which she was heir.

Puzzled by her own feelings, and impatient of them, she turned from Edwy's pathetic figure to the rough flushed face grinning in the opening.

"What have you done with my Prince?" she asked sharply.

"Lent him to a team travelling for Worcester, that come this way at dawning; so he won't betray you."

"Poor boy! He won't like that! I hope they'll be nice to him—and he'll soon find his way home. You really are a clever man, Cordy, and when I get back the tale shall not suffer in the telling. Mean-

time you can be thinking what father shall do for you."

The grin broadened, then was dismissed by a sense of the solemn importance of the moment. This was indeed the tide in his affairs.

"Now, Mistress, is there aught else you need before I shut the door on you?"

Jehane was loath to have the ugly friendly face shut out, and the broad beating of his shovel on the turves gave her a sense of imprisonment—of burial. She would have liked a ride, or a race with the dogs, or the wind on Wolferlow, to drive away the consciousness of powers strong and strange within her and about her. Instead, she was cramped where she could not stand upright, but must kneel and see ever before her the source of all her trouble, Edwy's troubled eyes.

"Well, and how fare you?" she asked, untenderly.

"Tell me," he said, "for I know not dreams from doings—did I slay Lord Lambert yesterday?"

"Slay Lord Lambert? It would take a far better swordsman than you to do that! No, you tumbled on the top of him with your great weight and broke his ribs and your own sword, that was all!"

"Saint Mary be thanked! Perchance now his face will leave me!"

"I should think so! Now be quiet! The fore-

man is coming, and he does not like cordwood that talks."

This first day of their imprisonment was not without its excitement, since the captives could hear all that passed without. The morning was not far worn when they heard the foreman in loud conversation with the colliers, demanding how it was that they had made two pits out of the material sufficient for only one, and why they had not been lighted. Cordy was silent, and Walter's replies, delayed, monosyllabic, and ever beside the mark, caused his superior to rail upon his idiocy, and to swear roundly at the team which should ere now have arrived with the necessary shelters. A little play was enacted, the foreman trying to start Cordy off to seek the team, and Cordy trying to delay until the foreman should have left the clearing.

At last, the collier having been fairly stormed off the field, Walter inquired in his own unhasting manner, whether the gossip he had heard from the mulemen for Worcester was indeed the truth, and that the young Lord had been slain in the forest by one of his own huscarls.

The foreman retorted that there was no more truth in it than you would expect of such kine. The fact was that one of his Norman friends who had a grudge against him (about a woman, he opined) had

crossed the water on purpose to be avenged, and had come to Clee in guise of a minstrel, had sung at the feast, and had afterwards stabbed Lord Lambert in the back, but not mortally.

The foreman gone, the silence was only broken by the sounds of Walter making up for the loss of his night's rest. Edwy also slept, and Jehane pretended to, but in truth she was very wide awake, and her senses being at their keenest, she could even detect through Walter's snores and the wind in the trees, the monotonous moan of the ford. Through this broke presently another sound, more awakening, more human—the ring of metal, the sliding of steel upon stone, the splashing of horses, and the voices of men.

Hidden there listening, Jehane was reminded of a childish escapade, when she had lain in a loft in harvest time in the convent, and had let the sisters go by calling her, and had laughed to herself in the scented twilight. Now the rattle burst out about them, men leapt to ground, stamping and shaking their knees, and one cuffed Walter awake while all demanded if he had seen aught of Edwy the tanner.

"Edwy the tanner, and who may he be?" drawled Walter, bringing down a clatter of talk.

"Why the tanner, man! You must ha' seen him—great big man—from Clee 'a be!"

"Have you seen him since last night, that's all we want to know!"

"In the Earl's name, say truth, you!"

"Haven't you heard how he's half killed Lord Lambert?"

"The Earl won't grudge to the man 'at brings him to castle!"

"If he crossed the ford last night you could hardly miss of him, collier!"

"The man's daft!"

"In the Earl's name, speak, you fool!"

When all had had their say several times over, came Walter's dawdling reply.

"Well now, masters—if I understand you rightly—you'm waked me up to know if I'd had any sight of this man you'm after—big man you says 'a be."

"Aye, big as Beelzebub!"

"Oh, God's Nails! Do somebody hurry the churl with a dagger!"

"Hush your tongue! Let him speak!"

Then Walter.

"I aren't seen no one since yesterday but foreman, and he'm little more'n five fut high, and barrin' my mate Cordy, what's broader'n he's long." He ended with a noisy yawn, and the men laughed.

"Come, you fellows, mount can't you! No good wasting time here with this—hog!"

"What hurry, Capt'n? If tanner ain't been by this way, we shan't see him no more, unless we look for him in wolf's belly."

"S'pose the collier's lying?"

"Tie him up by the thumbs and see what he'll say then!"

There was a rude chorus of laughter.

"You'm best leave that to *He*!" the emphasis indicated the Earl.

"'Tweren't tanner at all to my thinking. Who minds what Piers says—'twas all to get that hide of land he's coveting this year past! Said he could see it was tanner! An' he furlong off and dull-eyed as a badger!"

"'Tis nothing to do o' we whether 'tis tanner or whether 'tis tinker. All we got to do is to bring tanner to castle for *Him* to play with!"

"What think you? Will it be red iron or boiling water, or hanging quick and quiet?"

"He won't trouble for neither. Them are for common men what brings their trials to sheriffs courts, not for Lords Marchers. No, it will either be eyes out or quartering. Well, he's no kin o' mine. Come, Jenkyn, we shall have a taste of something ourselves if we dally."

"What ails you, Jehane, they are gone?"

Jehane had hidden her face, shuddering.

"Besides, they would not have hurt you."

She only made a sound of impatience.

"Can it be that it is for me you fear death?"

asked Edwy softly, "I fear it not for myself."

"Nay," she answered, her voice smothered in her hands, "not death—all men must die! But this tearing out of eyes—this quartering alive—'tis brutal, *brutal*, I say! If you fear not that 'tis because you are stupid!"

"'Tis an old custom."

"I care not! Custom forsooth! To torment a man for days and then drag him on a hurdle to be pulled in pieces before all the people, or leave him blind and helpless for life! Oh, suppose you had—had *sneezed* only, while those men were here!"

Then, seeing realization dawn upon Edwy's languid brain, she was sorry she had spoken, and relieved when some strange sounds diverted the attention of both.

A resounding slap, followed by a heavy grunt from Walter, indicated Cordy's return.

At first there was little to be learned from the confusion of uncouth sounds. Cordy seemed to be wallowing in laughter and self-gratulation, and his mate urging him to tranquility by bodily violence.

"Aye, they didn't believe me! They gave me foul words when I told them it wasn't here shelters was wanted, but right over to Penhettan. Almost tired of their job they was when I met them 'off by the Watlows! 'No,' they says, 'us don't believe

you. Foreman told us but two days gone that you and Walter was here, playing for shelters—swore at us proper, too ! ”

“ ‘ You got to go to Penhettan instead,’ says I. ‘ Who told you that ? ’ says they. ‘ Warden,’ says I, ‘ so shut your foul mouth, or ‘ twill be the worse for you.’ An’ then I give them as good as they brought, and they says they was going to take me along, and if ‘ twasn’t truly Warden’s word as they was to go to Penhettan they wouldn’t leave a whole bone in my body. And then—oh ho—ge—he—seemed he didn’t know his road, and got quite civil for me to show un ! An’ I showed un, proper ! By the Withy beds—over the ford o’ Reeds, and into Deil’s marsh—he—ee—an there they be like to ducks squattering in the mud—and the shelters half sunken when I saw them last——! ”

He leaned against the stack, and laughed, and slapped his knees, until the whole structure rocked. Jehane, much comforted by his presence, called softly,

“ Well done—Well done, Cordy ! But I hope they won’t drown ! ”

“ Not they ! And maybe the tanner will give them some’ut to buy new breeches.”

The way in which Cordy looked upon success and rewards all round as the natural end of the adventure was pleasant and comforting. He seemed, moreover,

absolutely tireless. Scarce had he finished his story than he began fresh plans. Sitting on the ground, leaning his broad shoulders against the pit, Jehane could hear his voice.

"Walter, if you had a shining white penny, what should you do of him?"

After a pause came Walter's voice,

"Thot—I conna tell to no man—by reason I don't know myself. Art reckoning what thou wilt get by hanging up two birds out o' reach of the cat that would like to scrat out their eyes?"

"Aye," answered Cordy, with supreme contempt, "'tis like to Cordy's way to sell his chickens before the eggs be laid! But suppose a shiny piece was to fall like as it might be between my legs here—but since 'twould take you more'n an hour to guess, I'll tell you. I should take him to Clee, and buy a bottle of red wine and a roasten fowl and wheaten bread, and feed my birds so as when the time come to loose 'em they should fly free and easy—aye, that's what I should do—and learn the news, moreover."

Jehane suddenly remembered the embroidered pouch with the silver pieces in it that was still about her neck. She took one, and threw it adroitly through the opening above her head. It alighted close to the waiting Cordy.

"Saints guard us from magic and witchcraft," chuckled he, "aye, aye, but 'tis righteous money, else

it would have turned to muck at the sign of the cross—'tis true silver—a miracle for sure ! ”

“ Cordy, I like you,” whispered Jehane, “ do get us something good to eat ; Edwy is miserable and will eat nothing, and I am tired of bacon. You can see father and Ursula, too, and Edwy's poor mother—they will be so fretting for us.”

“ Nay, nay, little mistress, if you leave it to me we'll run no risks ; better a heartache to-day than a heart-break to-morrow. Women is women, or so I'm told, and fathers is fathers I know, if I may liken Woodward to the likes of we. Aye, they're best as they are. It won't be for long, and saints grant it won't, for if shelters don't come to-morrow foreman will set us to making some with our own hands, and if I was to tell him we couldn't light the hearth, he'd welt me and then drop the live gleeds down the top himself—and then where would you two be ? ”

“ We should need to call upon the angel who made the boiling pitch just warm and pleasant when they dipped Saint Juliana in it, though it flew up and scalded the soldiers who put her in—seven times seven and five more, the book says, though I do not see how there could be so many. Yet I fear me angels will never come for my asking, and I do not want foreman hurt either. But go you, Cordy ! There is another penny ! ”

"Who is the saint of those who for the good of their souls are shut up in charcoal pits, Edwy?" she said when Cordy had gone, and she kept herself amused and the wounded man quiet, with whispered chat. "I don't believe there is one on purpose, so I shall instal Saint Felix. You know him not? I do, I know about all the saints, we took turns to read them aloud in refectory to keep us from talking. Saint Felix was a bishop and did many holy deeds; but what I love him for is that he took the trouble to use his own wits before he called on the heavenly host; and when the persecutors were seeking him up and down the streets of the city to slay him, by chance they met him face to face. Not knowing him one of them asked him if he had seen Felix, 'No,' said he, 'I have met no Felix.' At first they were deceived, but after a doubt struck them, and they turned back. Now Felix heard them clattering down the street after him, so he popped through a hole in the wall, and when the wicked men came up, one said, 'he has gone through there,' but another, who thought well of his own wits, said 'no, do you not see there is a spider's web stretched across it; no man has gone through to-day.' So they were satisfied, and went their way. But for all that Felix *had* been through the hole, and it was the Lord's own spider that had been sent to weave a web quicker than ever spider wove before. After that Felix lived in a dry

well—as dull as this, I should think—and was fed by a holy woman, just as Cordy feeds us ; and at last he got free, and had many other adventures, and died at a good old age.

I like him much better than those poor dear virgin martyrs who first worried into rages the men who wanted to marry them, and then forgave them their deaths.

Oh, when will Cordy be back ! How hot it is ! 'Tis well for you, who sleep half the time ! Yet I suppose I must bear it, since I love not martyrdom, and have no reason to think that either angels or holy spiders will interfere on my behalf."

CHAPTER XI

TWO WAYS OF LOVE

THE spell of east wind and cold rain passed with the second day of their imprisonment ; the wind turned southerly, the wet ground steamed, and the perfume which each tree sends ever to heaven hung at a low human level like the smoke of Cain's sacrifice.

The odours of peeled oak-branches, of peaty turf, of damp bracken, were heavy in the pit, exposed as it was to the sun, and ventilated only by the opening in the top. The stifling air oppressed Jehane to a distraction of impatience, while Edwy, weak and in pain, suffered more and more patiently.

In a fit of penitence for divers sharp speeches, and touched by his weary looks, she sat in the still dimness, fanning him with doubled bracken fronds. He watched her as she sat, the faint light from above casting the shadow of her hair upon her brow, and of downcast lashes on her cheek ; he noted the sober little mouth, the round slim neck and tiny ear, the soft white nape from which for coolness' sake she had rolled up her hair.

She was conscious of his eyes, yet would not look at him, and fanned as if in the machine-like monotony of her movements lay her safety. Perhaps this was so, for when she paused to brush away a midge from her forehead, Edwy caught her hand in its descent.

There was a momentary break in the rhythm of her movement, but she did not otherwise show that she was conscious of his action ; only she seemed to hold her breath.

Still watching her, he drew her hand slowly nearer and nearer, first to his cheek, then to his lips.

"Have you forgiven me, Jehane ? " he said softly, "or do you still hate me ? Much has happened since you told me that, and very much you have done for me, but you have said little. Speak now—tell me you forgive."

She made no reply, only wondered why she should be trembling, since she neither feared nor hated him.

"Why do you hold my hand ? " she said when she could speak steadily.

"Why should I not ? "

"I thought perhaps you were dreaming I was Ursula, or that other lady, the lady in Clee."

"The lady in Clee ? I know of no lady in Clee whose hand I care to kiss, or even sweet Ursula's. Jehane, do you not yet know that 'tis yourself alone that I desire ? That 'twas for your sake alone I could not mate with Ursula ? It was you stole my heart—

that day, that dreadful beautiful day ! That kiss of yours—it stole my heart, for all I strove to be true ! I tried to bind it with oaths, but you had stolen it out of my body. I had none for Ursul’—no faith to give for all the oaths. Jehane !—dearest, dearest Jehane——”

His voice faltered, his hand stole down about her shoulder, and he drew her to him till her head was on his breast. So for a moment she stayed, all strength, all wish for resistance gone in the overshadowing of a power that was too sweet and too mighty for her, as it has been for the mightiest.

“Thou lovest me then, Jehane ? Of a surety thou lovest me !” he whispered.

Putting away his reluctant hand, she raised her head and looked at him ; at first with innocent unconscious desire ; but not for long—her own spirit returned, and she smiled sadly, somewhat ironically.

“At least do not kill me with your scorn !” he implored. “I am but a craftsman, and no noble ; but at least I am an honest man, and not a foreigner !”

“I do not hate you, nor scorn, though you do your best to make me when you talk like that,” she answered, “but as for loving—I know not. I will tell you another time—it is too dark in here, and too hot—much too hot !”

“At least assure me that it is not this fine young

lord that has come between us, or I shall regret that I was not in truth guilty of his blood. Jehane, if I have no other right, say for the moment that I have the brother's right to ask—what has there been between you ? ”

“ Brother ! To me ! Think of Ursul' and be ashamed ! You have no sort of right to ask me anything ! ” cried Jehane in white anger.

“ Then 'tis true ! May he burn in hell for it ! I saw him give you gold ornaments, silver coins ! ”

“ You did. And what of that ? ”

“ What of that ? Why, that I have gold and silver at home, and you shall give me in exchange for them at least as much as you give a devil-Norman ! ”

He rose to his knees and approached her, but she stopped him with a firm hand.

“ One word more, and I leave you, come of it what may. No, I am not very angry now. I reflect that one like you must have always folly in his thoughts. It is what I expect now I know you better than once I did.”

He tried to embrace her, but she easily kept him at arm's length, the cramped quarters depriving him of the advantage of his height. His strength soon failed, and he sank back on the heather ; lying there watching her, he wondered, amid a tangle of less worthy thoughts, what secret lay beneath that quiet bosom and those bright eyes that would tell him nothing.

Like the sound of God walking in the garden the voice of birds broke into the passionate air—the short shrill song of a wren, the carol of a wagtail, the soothing of a dove. As though at the signal the evening breeze awoke, moving through the forest like the tide on a quiet shore. Jehane opened the shutter, and drank in the breath of the woods, sighing as one sighs who is weary of day and in love with dark and coolness.

The living peace was undisturbed. The sweet air came about her, lifted her heavy hair and cooled her eyes; the dear forest sounds came with it, the calling of the birds to each other, the tinkling of antlers against the branches, the rustling of fawn or rabbit, the tiny chirping of mice beneath the leaves. Once a fallow buck looked at her between the trunks with so sentimental an expression in his great soft eyes that they reminded her of Edwy, and she smiled with a twist of irony.

Looking within, there Edwy lay, his handsome face just visible in the dimness, his eyes closed, his helpless left hand upon his breast. She sighed sharply, and turned away.

It grew darker. The only sounds now were the burring of a fern-owl, the tinkle of a hidden brook, the plashing of [deer in their drinking-pool by the ford, and away, somewhere in the untrodden waste of trees, the ugly cry of a wild-cat. Nothing moved

but the little bats flitting to and fro across the clearing, and up above the tree-tops, stars.

It was surely time for vespers. She repeated her 'pater noster,' then her Ave Mary, and her thoughts wandered to the hum of the chapel and the moaning litanies.

"Pater de coelis, Deus," she whispered, "misere nobis. Sancta Dei Genitrix, ora pro nobis. Sancta Virgo Virginum, ora pro nobis. Sanctus Michael, Sanctus Gabriel, Sanctus Raphael, ora pro nobis. Omnes sancti beatorum spirituum ordines, orate pro nobis. Sancta Maria Magdalena, Sancta Agatha, Sancta Lucia, Sancta Agnes, Sancta Caecilia, Sancta Catherina, Sancta Anastasia, Omnes sanctae Virgines et viduae, orate pro nobis——"

She was roused from her reverie by a startling and horrible yell. The two wild-cats, who had been arguing at a distance, had approached, it must be supposed in an armed neutrality, for their pent-up animosity burst forth in ear-piercing cries of hatred, snappings, mewings, growls of anger and pain.

Jehane put her head out as far as it would go to try and catch sight of the combatants, laughing to think how very angry Cordy would be if he found her in full view of fallow-deer, stars, and cats.

She called Walter, told him to turf her up safely, and keep her misdoing from Cordy, and then, without a look at Edwy, curled up with her face to

the oak-branches, which but for her would by this time have been marketable charcoal, and went to sleep.

At first, even in sleep, her heart throbbed, and she started from dreams, but as night went by she lay more and more peacefully, and before dawning slumbered like a babe, with limbs relaxed and quiet breath.

When she awoke all seemed changed to her. She felt like one who has suddenly left home, has travelled through strange lands and found another home far away, and waking there for the first time, remembers with wonder old wakings. The journey was over, her heart was no more agitated with present doubts and forecasted woe. She felt cool and sad and certain.

And this new home her heart had waked in was as a shrine round which her thoughts stood like pilgrims, and, like pilgrims, brought an offering. The image in the shrine was Ursula.

Ursula must be made happy. Ursula would not be happy without Edwy. That he, to Jehane's mind, was greatly unworthy, was a misfortune ; but he had been faithful before he had entertained this mad affection for herself, and would be faithful once more if she, Jehane, were removed irrevocably out of his reach. He true, Ursula would be happy. It could be done, and Jehane was impatient for the hour of

doing it. She ever abhorred waiting, either for good or ill.

When Edwy awoke she was sitting with her legs twisted under her, mending the thong of her leggings with a strip of deerskin. He watched her until she caught his longing eyes and laughed at him.

"You must be hungry," she said, digging her knife in the ground preparatory to using it on the black bread.

"Do not look at me so!" cried Edwy, unnerved by the mocking face, "I know I deserved your anger, dear, but it was my love of you that spoke—it was surely natural—let me have your hand in token of forgiveness. I have not sinned too deeply to be forgiven!"

"We have both sinned, but I the more deeply. A sin of ignorance should have but light penance, or may even be pardoned on penitence only, or so our father confessor was wont to say."

"What do you mean, Jehane? I understand you not. Be not so unkind to me! I take back my hasty words of Lord Lambert—I meant them not, since they anger you!"

He tried to take the hand with which she offered him bread; did indeed catch her dress, but she drew it away.

"Yes, we have both sinned," she said, with a solemnity that was not without its relish, "but I

the more deeply, since you knew not the thing I know. Your words of Lord Lambert did not trouble me beyond the moment, wicked as they were. But for the other words you spoke, and the caress I permitted, think not I permit them again. They were sin in you and double sin in me, since you knew not."

"Know not what? Ah, Jehane, say not your mind has changed? Say not you hate me!"

"That is foolish talk. I do not hate you; but for this loving you want—it is wickedness even to talk of—I am the Bride of Christ."

"What!" he cried incredulous, "'tis you who talk folly now! The Bride of Christ! A holy nun! You!"

"I. I know well I am not worthy, and it is little wonder you doubt it. Still it is true."

Edwy started to his knees, and this time caught her fairly in his arm.

"You shall not do it! 'Tis not fitting for a maid like you! You are mine—I will not let you do this thing!"

She did not struggle, for she reflected that even with only one arm he was stronger than herself, and if she strove she might set his wound bleeding dangerously.

"Be still, Edwy," she said, "you will only hurt yourself. Of course you can hug me like a bear, but what are you the better for it? As soon as this is

over and we can go home I shall enter the Holy House at Clee, and take my vows as soon as the rule permits. Think you I will resign so sacred an inheritance to be wife to any man, least of all yours, with broken vows on your soul and foul suspicion of me in your heart ! Loose me, and if you must be on your knees, pray forgiveness of heaven. But if you follow my advice you will lie down and rest you."

What effect this defiance would have had in other circumstances is hard to say ; but the wounded man's powers were spent, and with a last protest—

"Jehane—I—will permit it not !" he fell back so near swooning that Jehane, aiding him as she might, must needs sob for her unkindness. Yet through her tears she smiled over his ready condemnation of her. He was the first man who had ever spoken to her of love ; and, thought she, if this be love, then love must be but a senseless thing, since it knew not true words from false, and cared not what it set store by.

Yet she pitied him.

"Thou very foolish Edwy," she said when he looked at her dismally, "What sorrows you make for yourself ! When once we are home, you shall know the whole story of my dealings with Lord Lambert. I will not tell it twice, but when I repeat everything he and I have done, and every word we

have spoken each to other, and father and Ursula sit by and listen—then you may listen too ! See ? ” she held up the gold collar with its dainty cross, “ and see ? ” she drew out the pouch with its silver pieces, holding it before his eyes and nodding at him provokingly, “ I’m very proud of them, and so will father and Ursul’ be when I tell them all about it.”

“ You drive me mad ! ” said Edwy.

CHAPTER XII

BRIDE OF CHRIST

IT was high morning before Cordy returned from Clee. He came waddling into the clearing, greeted his mate with a cheerful yell, threw his bag on the ground, and strode to the pit.

"Come forth, little mistress, and master Edwy, too, for I pledge me you are both ready," he shouted, tearing open the entrance. The prisoners crept out.

Edwy shrank from the light, covering his eyes, but Jehane gazed on the thick woodland as a girl gazes at her lover when he sees her not. The sun, for her, had doubled his brightness, the flames of the fire their beauty. The forest seemed new-created; even Cordy, in his grinning ugly importance, even Walter's dirty face and knotted beard, even the ill-shaped mule, were all glorious in her eyes, reviving as wine to her troubled spirits. She would have set off home at once, but this her host and gaoler peremptorily forbade.

"I owe you much, Cordy, I know, and it irks me to refuse you, but I must think first of my father," she said with a touch of the dignity of the Wood-

ward's daughter, but Cordy was not easily impressed.

"Aye!" he said, "aye! Yet when your necks were in danger you were glad enough of Cordwood Jack to tell you to do this and not to do that—aye, and to think for you and work for you, moreover, little mistress."

"Now don't call me ungrateful, Cordy, you know I am not that! But they must think me dead, and it is unkind of you to lay commands upon me that I cannot obey. It is folly, too, for you say yourself that all danger is past. I ought to go home without a moment's delay. I am going, too—you can bring Edwy after, since he cannot walk so far. Goodbye, Edwy, we shall soon meet again."

She was half across the clearing when Walter stretched out a long unexpected arm and detained her.

"The Fools be mid-thigh! None can pass afoot! Yon fat-headed Jack should have told you!"

She turned with head tossed back.

"Is that your notion of a jest, Cordy? To try if I would obey your bare word? Very well, to pay for your jest you shall spare me your mule, for go I will!"

"I should be loath to tie your little feet together, mistress, for 'twould vex you sore; but better vexed than dead, so the word runs, and 'tis more than your

life's worth to get up on Guthlac. Aye, aye, you are wroth with me I know, and I wish I had a girl to think o' me as you do o' the Woodward—though good features I could not look for in a child o' mine. But mind you 'twas for your sake I started this morning an hour before light, before ever the cocks crew to scare the devils out of the trees, without a bite or sup to my lips, so as you might know your good fortune early, and 'tis for you that Walter starts but now for Clentsmore for a pair of ponies, so as to get you home fair and safely. Be you content now, and you shall be at the dwelling by noon, you have Cordwood Jack's word for it. Be you content!"

Jehane pouted, but gave way.

"Well," she said, "if I have no choice but between drowning in the Ford of Fools and being killed by the very ugliest mule in the world, I suppose I must wait! No, I am not angry, for you are very good, Cordy. What have you there? A pasty? And wheaten bread? And ewe cheese? Come, Edwy, eat something for a change. Tell us your adventures, Cordy! How did you find out? Is the Earl's wrath really appeased? And by what miracle?"

Cordy was enchanted to tell his tale.

Having spent the night at the hut of some obscure relative in Clee, he had seen the cavalcade set out from the castle for Gubenhale; the Earl, Lord

Lambert with Wulf at his side, and a posse of men-at-arms.

But this was not enough for the cautious burner. He loitered all day in Clee, letting the gossip of the place run in at his big ears, neither assenting nor contradicting, and at last he was rewarded, for as he sat on the alehouse bench, in the gloaming, Wulf the Churl rode up the street, glancing from side to side out of his little light eyes that shone so oddly in his swart face. Seeing Cordy, he dismounted and called for ale.

While they drank, each man looked at the other over his pot, and by way of opening conversation Cordy inquired of the young Lord's health, at which the squire frowned, and grumbled that he had ridden for Gubenhale too soon and flat against the leech's command. Cordy, at that, deemed it pity that a noble of such estate should risk his health by such haste to take up lordship over his new vassals. In that he was much mistook, zealous Wulf informed him, and was judging by his own low ideas, for Lord Lambert's haste had not such unworthy motive, but was all from his goodness of heart, and thought for a vassal, that very churl indeed who was the cause of his suffering. How so, inquired Cordy. That his own errand in Clee might prove, the squire had answered. How so, asked Cordy humbly asking pardon. That was easy to show, since he was

charged with a message for Pargeter the Woodward, should he be in Clee, or for any woodman he might meet. Cordy supposed the nobles, not knowing one craft from the other, might call a collier a woodman, and Wulf, condescending, supposed so too. Cordy, as a friend of the tanner, hoped then that he might ask the substance of the message. The Squire replied that if he met with Edwy, or any that was in communication with him, he could give him to know that the heat of search was over, and that short of vaunting himself under the castle walls, he was free to go about his business.

Since Lord Lambert was so tender of his enemies, Cordy had inquired how came it that he had permitted so strict a hunting of a man he himself had hurt, whereupon Wulf had called him bad names.

"What more could my Lord have done had it been his own brother, instead of a God-forgotten son of a tanner, who had set on him in the forest, causeless? He had no pleasure in having the man hunted like a wolf, but what can any do when the Earl's wrath is up? Have you ever tried soothing a wounded boar with lullabies, or a wild-cat with cakes? Then talk not of turning Earl John from his purpose. Mind my words if you come across the Woodward or the tanner;—that is all for you to remember."

At that Wulf had ridden back to Gubenhale.

"Aye," said Cordy with much satisfaction, 'twas just as if Lord Lambert himself had sent me a message; something like a lord to live under, him!"

"'Tis well he should have your good word," said Jehane, with a glance at Edwy, "since we shall soon be all his vassals; for Earl John will die of a rage ere long. He is worse than the King, who, they say, rolls among the rushes in his fits, so that even great warriors and Lords fly from his presence terrified. So you must come home with me, Edwy."

"Nay, nay," said the unhappy youth, "better anything than that! Master Pargeter would give me but a cold welcome, seeing all the trouble I have brought."

"You do wrong to speak so. Think you my father would not welcome any wounded man, let alone one he has loved like a son, be he comfort or be he trouble, and Ursul' will tend you right well, and be far kinder than I," she added maliciously, while Edwy groaned as though these mental discomforts, added to his bodily ones, were quite beyond his bearing.

By midday the party left the clearing. Walter had secured two ponies from a gang, which, having brought a load of charcoal from the inland parts of the forges by Saint Cyneberts, were resting on Clentsmoor. They were untrained beasts, but sober with hard work and low living, and well used to the

stick, their coats flying charcoal at every smack.

The colliers took Guthlac for the fording, and rode him as often as he would permit, but he was in singularly evil mood even for him, and jibbed, kicked, rubbed his rider against trees, and did everything except fall, for which he had been incapacitated by nature.

Back across the ford again ; up the river-ride, so grim on the night of their escape, now dimpling with shadow and sun ; along the north road, past the spot, trampled by searchers, where the fight had been ; past Shadrachs ; along the familiar bridle-path, home.

The sun shone clear across the space, the birches moved graciously in the wind, the grass after the rain was bright as enamel, wild roses starred the undergrowth. The dwelling, looking out on this, was as harmoniously part of the wildwood as hare's form or bird's nest, yet square-shaped for the greater dignity of man, and eloquent of his higher standing. From it a thin blue smoke went up like his aspirations.

Ursula stood in the afternoon sun, idle. Not so was she wont to pass her time ; but it was her way to be still when her world went wry, and she looked a peaceful figure with folded arms and bent head, though the quiet covered a wrung heart ; even Ursula's calm faith was shaken by recent events. Edwy,

the friend of so many years, her almost husband, had suddenly failed them all, had proved untrue, had committed unaccountable crime, was flying with a price on his head ; her beloved sister, innocent, wild as a bird, temptingly lovely, had vanished with him. What wonder if her folded hands were wrung and wet with tears. What had passed between those three who had met at nightfall to such tragic end ? Edwy the broken reed, Jehane, wayfarer in the land between child and woman, and the unknown Lord Lambert ? What Ursula knew of young nobles did not incline her to trust ; her heart was torn ; she would have liked to rush into the forest and cry " Jehane, Jehane ! Little sister, come back ! " She would have liked to search and search until Jehane was in her arms. But her father, whose orders were not to be lightly disobeyed, had forbidden her to leave the dwelling, and she could only stand in the doorway, twisting comely hands and turning over anxious thoughts. As she pondered, her absent eyes watched a rabbit washing his face at his threshold. Suddenly his toilet ceased, his small fore-feet dropped together on his narrow chest, his great eyes stared ; then, quicker than a hand-clap, he was underground. Ursula looked round for the cause of his disturbance, and saw a light figure flying towards her. In a moment Jehane was caught and kissed as the child Jehane had so often been.

"I have brought him back !—Brought him back to you, dear ! "

"Whom ? Edwy ? Do you mean Edwy ? Where have you been, Jehane ? "

"I got him over the river ! Do you know nothing ? I hid him—I mean Cordy hid us both—I had to, you know, he was wounded."

"I knew it ! But not badly, Jehane, not badly, was he ? "

"No, of course not—do not pinch my arms—he wasn't wounded to hurt, only he was so stupid—stupid as a sick cat—could not or would not take care of himself ! But Cordy Jack was splendid—put us in a sham pit—so stuffy, and my hair is full of bits—I long to comb it."

"You are safe—safe home, the Virgin be thanked ! But where is he, child ? And is the Earl appeased ?

"I don't know about that, but he has gone to Gubenhale, and the hunt is over. Edwy is in the wood there with Walter and Cordy—I came on to warn you what a troll he looks—frightfully ugly—so I told them to wait. Shall I call them ? "

She called shrilly, and the two went forward to meet the men.

Twilight was falling, and over the party gathered round the hearth was the twilight tenderness of peril

past ; in the heart of one the tenderness of a parting to be. The colliers had told their tale, had been feasted and rewarded, and had gone their way in great content ; young Dickon had been despatched to Clee to ease the minds of the old tanner and his wife ; and now the Woodward was alone with his daughters and Edwy.

Perceptibly worn by the anxieties of the past week, he sat upon a stool on one side of the hearth, having resigned the settle to Edwy, who lay on the broad seat of it, glad enough, for all his passion for Jehane, to rest under Ursula's gentle hands and quiet eyes.

Jehane sat among the rushes, combing the dry bracken-chips out of her hair, leaving no space of silence for awkwardness to fill ; telling the story of the fight, the flight, the imprisonment ; jesting with her father, questioning Ursula, and teasing Edwy, who watched her with melancholy eyes.

After their first meeting she kept her sister at a distance, but on her father lavished caresses.

"Not much chastened by tribulation, this child," he remarked, unloosing the knot by which she had tied his beard to one of the locks of her own hair ; "get you gone, pixie !"

"Oh, father, have I not been gone long enough ! I'm glad to be home ! Do you hear, father ? I am glad, glad, *glad* to be home !"

She performed a slow dance round the room, talking as she danced.

"I did not enjoy my stay in the pit. Will you believe it, Ursul' ? although I had Edwy's pleasant company, I was not content. To be sure there was one moment——" she paused as if in pleasant recollection, and Edwy glanced at her uncomfortably.

"When was that ? " asked Ursula.

"When was what ? "

"The one moment you were happy."

"Can't you guess ? Edwy can, can't you, Edwy ! The moment Cordy told us we were free, of course ! Father, what a nice man Cordy is ! He has so much sense, hasn't he ? And he never uses bad words like the other men. I can't think what the pleasure is men take in it. This morning the mule was enough to make a dove call on the evil one, and Walter, who does not generally talk much more than a tree, had several things to say. As to the foreman, when he found two hearths instead of one—do you remember, Edwy ? "

She stood with her arms akimbo, looking round with the air of a stout and angry man to his subordinates.

"May the devil break all your four bones, you men ! Did you steal the wood ? Or have you built the hearths hollow ? " As for the Headborough—and the men-at-arms ! But Cordy, the

worst he ever said was 'Saint Ninian's hair!'—a gentle oath, I'm sure."

"I always had a good opinion of the man, rough as he is," said the Woodward, "and he seems to have shown a wonderful deal of sense in keeping you in order; I must have a lesson from him. As for swearing, I marvel he did not tell you of the lesson he had about calling on the devil, and how Saint Guthlac came to his aid."

"Tell it us, father, tell it us! My tongue is quite weary."

"It happened when he was a lad, foul-mouthed as all these forest boys. He was journeying with his mule and charcoal bags through Chenefare wood, and fell into the bog-land between there and Abberley. His language, if he is to be believed, was something quite out of the common, and he ended by calling on the devil to come and tear him in pieces if he did not cut his beast's throat as soon as he got his own feet on solid ground. Of course when he got the poor mule out, he did but comfort it, and rub it down, for besides being his livelihood, he was fond of the beast. But while he was scraping the mud from its left fore-leg, so he tells, the devil came up behind and caught him in his claws—he shows the scars in his side to this day, like burns. In his extremity of terror he called on Saint Guthlac, the great saint who knows well the wiles of demons that lurk in boggy places,

having had experience. The saint answered his call, beat the devil so hard that he was forced to loose his hold, and with a great howl of rage took his claws out of Cordy and disappeared in the bog, which boiled and steamed like a kettle of soup for yards around. Then Cordy, and the mule also, fell prostrate at the saint's feet, and Cordy vowed that he would never again call on the powers of darkness or speak the name of the devil except in prayer. Naught strange in that—many a man has done the like in fear or sickness, the strange thing is that this man has kept his vow. When he feels a bad word coming he says 'aye,' so no need to mock at him for it, naughty one."

"No, indeed, for men do not always keep their vows, do they, father?"

Edwy coloured at the demure glance, and Ursula, defending him, retorted—

"You speak of Lord Lambert, I suppose, and the vow he made, and broke so speedily."

"Peace, children," said Pargeter, "Jehane knows well she was to blame in that matter, and that a foolish and wicked vow is rightly broken, though it is not every man has courage to avow it."

CHAPTER XIII

A WILD APPLE-TREE

ONCE again, in the dawn of a morning, Jehane rose and prepared herself for a journey. There were no wreaths of white blossom now to beckon her through the window, for the cherry leaves hung two and two, half-folded, as though the trees were weary after the burden of the fruit.

For one with a long ride in prospect it was time to be stirring; for, though twilight still, there was no mist, no gracious dew, no sharpness in the air; but a dry, languorous warmth, a sweetness too sweet to last, telling every forest dweller that a storm would come before nightfall. More than once in the cloudless summer night, distant thunder had moaned round the purple vault that held the forest.

When she was dressed for wayfaring, she again took in her hands her little wealth, the gold collar she hid by Ursula's side, but the cross she slipped on a ribbon and hung it within the breast of her kirtle. This done she bade farewell.

With neither tear nor sigh, but with a face that was quiet and tragic, she crept about the dwelling in

the half-light, softly touching this and that familiar thing—her father's axe and horn behind the door, the tapestry her mother had worked, Ursula's spinning-wheel, even the everyday platters and jugs. This over she came to a harder task. The curtain of the Woodward's bed were open, but she knew there was little fear of disturbing his deep and wholesome slumber, and she looked long, wondering how it was possible that she, so dear to him, could step out of his house, out of his life, thus and he not be aware of it, even through his sleep. Yet no dream warned him, he neither stirred nor sighed, and she passed to the guest-chamber. As she held the curtains back, she started to see that Edwy did not slumber, but looked at her with widely opened eyes. He did not speak, taking her for some vision of his feverish unrest, and when she raised a warning finger to her lips, he did the like, as though in bewildered acquiescence to a heavenly command.

With her eyes on his, she made the sign of the cross on brow and breast, then stepped back and let the curtains fall.

Her last farewell was for Ursula, on whose face she looked long, and ventured a kiss ; Ursula's lips met hers, but she did not wake.

"It is for your sake, dear," Jehane whispered ; "I wish you could know, and I hope you never, never will."

Then she went out, saddled Prince, and took the road to Clee.

Like most travellers, she halted at the Hoar Cross, said a prayer at the shrine, and looked down at the winding river. It might be long before she saw it again, for the convent lay inland, and her road to the right, rough and steep, climbed away from the river, up towards the hills. In that moment the stream, hastening, singing, laughing at sun and wind, wilful and free, seemed a symbol of the liberty and joyous young carelessness she was leaving for ever behind her.

She did not waver; the path of righteousness lay plain, and regrets were but stones on the way. Yet she cast about for an excuse to keep the river in sight a little longer.

Almost opposite Ribeford Manor, crowning the low red rocks of the Eastern shore, overlooking the safe and shallow ford of which the men of Ribeford and Gubenhale were so overproud, stood the castle, erect, smiling, ready for strife, like a young strong man. It occurred to Jehane that it would be only courteous to thank Lord Lambert for the part he had played regarding Edwy, and to tell him to what profit they had followed his advice. It would take her but a short time longer to go through Gubenhale and over Lax and so to Clee by the main road. A spark of cheerfulness dawned on her face at the thought of

thus putting off the evil hour, and as she hesitated, another pretext came to her aid. A hundred yards down the lane was an old man in a rabbit-skin cloak, tending a sow and her piglings as they routed by the laneside. It would lighten her conscience to send a message home, to tell them she was safe. So she turned down the track that runs by the broad Dowlas, and crossed the river by the Bridle Ford.

Now she was in Lord Lambert's own domain.

Along the river-side stretched a strip of green meadow, the common grazing-ground of the villagers, good pasture in summer, and dappled now with kine. Above it ran a stony path, beyond reach of floods, and serving to keep in check the encroachment of the woods. A cheerful tinkle of sheep and goat bells out of the underwoods testified to the well-being of the hamlet, while from further off could be heard shouts of reapers in the fields of corn.

Now fairly on her way, and the castle before her, Jehane hesitated. Surely she had made for herself a very foolish errand, since to ride past a castle wall is by no means the same thing as to speak with the Lord of it. As for boldly asking speech of him of the men-at-arms, that never occurred to her—she would rather have met a boar. And, then, she said to herself, what folly to imagine he might be riding in the woods, when he must be so full of the business of his new lordship, and not fit to sit a horse

at all ! Thus she scolded herself, sitting for rest and coolness under a gnarly wild apple, on whose branches the little green balls caught the light and shone among the darker foliage. The breeze that follows running water, even on the even of thunder, cooled her cheeks, hot with the sun and flushed with indecision.

" Yet now I have gone so far," she said, reasoning against her reason, " I may as well go on, for it is very ill fortune to turn back in a new enterprise ; and though it is a longer road by Gubenhale, it is a better one for Prince. No, no, Jehane, you are deceiving yourself—the shortest road is the luckiest on an errand such as yours. So farewell, Lord Lambert, and I would you might know I am grateful ! "

She looked towards the castle wistfully, and threw a little green apple towards it. The keep, glowing red and raw-cut as the rock itself, faced the river. A ditch ran round, and a drawbridge connected the main gate with the sloping path to the ford, another smaller drawbridge led out on the landward side from a postern door.

From where she sat Jehane could see this postern quite plainly, and as she looked a horse was led up to it, and a figure issued, crossed the ditch and mounted.

Slowly the horseman came to the stony track, and so, between river and wood, slowly towards her. She waited until he was near, then rose and made a shy obeisance.

"Ha! It is as I thought, you and my old friend Prince. I thought so when I saw you from the walls. Have you come to seek me, little maid? And all alone? Has aught gone wrong? You came to seek me, and did not like to knock at the castle gate—is that not so?"

"Yes, my lord, I came to seek you," she answered shyly; "at least I thought, as I was on my way elsewhere, I would be bold to ask in Gubenhale whether you were restored to health."

"I rejoice to see you safe, little one. You must tell me your adventures, they must have been marvellous. By God's eyes, you hid that tanner well! I would fain know how, since in these days none knows how soon he himself may have need to hide. You will not grudge me the secret!"

He dismounted and sat beside her.

"It was a poor wood-collier hid us, else had we both been dead to-day, so you must give no praise to me, my lord. I would gladly tell you of it, only that I am in haste."

"In haste? And sad? And seeking me? Then the right thing for you is to tell me your griefs while we sit here together. What is this hasty errand to Gubenhale?"

"My errand is to Clee, but I rode this way to ask if you were well recovered, and to leave word for you that both Edwy and I escaped; also, if I had the good

fortune to see you, I purposed to thank you for all your goodness."

Lambert faced round on her with a twist of his lips.

"Who is this who had come to my lands to seek me? Not little Jehane of the woods? Not the brave maid I met once, twice, thrice in the forest, the little law-breaker who ran between drawn swords and hid a malefactor from the earl's justice, and called Lambert de Fort-Castel an oath-breaker and a traitor, and never blushed for her naughty tongue!"

"Ah!" cried Jehane, "now I am not afraid of you any more, for when you laugh and show your teeth I remember me that the Lord of Gubenhale is the very same that——"

She stopped abruptly, lowered the lashes to hide her bright eyes, and drew down her saucy lip.

"The same that what? God's life, here be mysteries! 'Tis more than can be borne with! What is this I did or said that turns maids dumb to think of? Nay, speak, or I shall think—I know not that I shall think——" he laughed a ringing laugh, so that the cattle in the meadow raised their heads to look at him.

"Nay, 'tis nothing, my lord," she answered, pressing her lips tight together to keep them from smiling, "'tis nothing at all. I would but say that

I remembered me that you—you liked my pie ! ”

“ Now, Jehane, listen,” said the young man between a smile and a frown, but on the whole sternly, “ I liked your pie, and I liked you, but I do not like mysteries. You have come here all by yourself to see me, and now you will not tell me why you have come. You are sad, and will not tell me the reason of your sadness ; you are just as your father was a week ago. Look me in the face, child. You know I cannot make you do aught against your will, but if you wish to please me you will tell me your trouble frankly. Has it aught to do with this Edwy ? ”

The question came as a surprise. How should he know about Ursula ? Jehane turned to him, not saucy now, but pale and woebegone.

“ God’s feet ! ” he cried, not waiting for words, “ I will cut his big head off his clumsy shoulders, as I ought to have done before ! ”

“ Nay, why ? ” said Jehane, puzzled ; “ sure you have hurt poor Edwy enough, though the fault was his own.”

“ If he has harmed you—— ! ”

“ Do not shout so—you frighten the oxen ! Why should Edwy harm me, of all people ? ”

“ Then what is the matter ? This passes my patience ! ” he exclaimed with his quick frown.

“ If I were good it would not be my grief but my

joy ! I go to Clee to enter the Holy House—to be the handmaid of Christ."

"God's Hair ! A holy nun ! That shall not be !"

"So Edwy said. Yet it must be, my lord."

"Is this what you came to tell me ?"

"Oh no ! I meant my farewell to be for ever, but not that you should know it."

"Now some great harm must have chanced to bring you to this. Say what you will, it is not natural. You do not love the thought ?"

"N-no, not as I should. But—if the Great Virgin and Saint Agnes will, I may grow holier."

"Some one is forcing you to it !"

"No, indeed ! How should one force me ? It is my own doing. No one so much as knows I am gone, far less the reason I go."

"None knows ? Not father or sister ? In truth this is not well at all. Perchance you will reveal it in confession to the priest or the Lady Abbess ?"

"I shall tell no priest, no, nor the Abbess. I shall not tell any one in the whole wide world !"

"Nay, but I hope there is one you will tell, for want of a better. Dear maid, you kept my secret right loyally, believe me I can also keep yours. What is it that drives you to the arms of the church ? Tell me," he said ; and again, "tell me !"

It was not alone his air of command, gift of

his imperious line, nor his unaffected friendliness alone, nor even her own woe crying for speech and sympathy; perhaps it was all three, for together they were powerful. She spoke, all in a burst.

"I . . . go for Ursula's sake! She must be happy! She *must*! I cannot have her weep! I would rather weep myself every day until I die! She *shall* be happy! Oh, tell no one! I meant no one to know!"

"Your sister Ursula," said the Norman thoughtfully, "have I not heard that she is the betrothed of the tanner?"

"She was, until he broke his oath. That was what made me so angry and ask that wicked thing of you. But now I have left him at home recovering of his wound. None can treat a wound like Ursula."

"So it is for your sister's sake that you don the habit of religion. But there are other means, and, as I think, better means, of curing this churl of his preference for you over his rightful betrothed."

"I said no such thing!" cried Jehane, but Lambert seemed to take little heed. He sat with his chin in his hand, not listening to her protests. Then rose as if to end their talk.

"Do not be disturbed, little maid, I will part with our secret to none, neither will I try to hinder you from entering the life of adoration; but

remember that I am a friend, and a strong friend, and that before the year is out you will see me again, and I shall hope then to bring you good news. Will you trust me? Life is not over yet."

Jehane could not resist the warm hope his words inspired. She had persuaded herself that for her life was over, but at this so positive tone a feeling crept into her heart, so used to happiness, that perhaps some unimagined way might open, though what she could not guess. The tragedy went from her face. She was not quite successful in keeping down a smile.

"Your father and sister will be very sad without you," said Lambert; "is there naught I can do for them while you are in the convent? I am still in your debt."

"Ah, no! The debt is the other way now. But—if after all Ursul' should marry Edwy, how proud she would be if you were by."

"It shall be done. That is an easy thing, and a pleasant one. I have a desire to see this Ursula of yours."

"You will go in your arms?"

"If you will."

"And your cloak of Anjou? The white samite?"

"On my truth. But how did you know I had a cloak of white samite?"

"It was talked of after your knighting."

"Is there naught else? Naught for yourself?"

"You will not say again that I may ask whatsoever I will, lest we quarrel again."

"I do not fear. You would not ask a man's life now—you, almost a holy sister."

"Must you needs remind me of that! But you are right—I desire nothing but holiness—if only I may attain to it!"

Here Lambert's charger stamped his large foot, impatient of inaction. Lights and shadows chased each other over Jehane's face.

"Yes, there is something I want, just one thing! I want it very much indeed. Give me a gallop on your horse—a small thing to grant to your brother-in-arms!"

"There seem few secrets in your house—who told you I called you my brother-in-arms? I wish I could take you before me, and we would have a good gallop indeed; but it is impossible, and I cannot trust you to Beaugris alone; he has never borne a lady."

"I am not a lady, and I should be quite, quite safe. See how he likes me!"

She stroked the charger's nose, and he looked at her down his long grave face.

"I have never ridden a really big horse, even father's Paynim is not very large, and now I shall not ride for—oh, I had forgot! I shall never ride,

unless when I am very old the Abbess lends me one of the convent mules. Yes, yes, you will let me! I knew you could not deny me when I told you that! There, bonny horse, bonny horse, you are going to take me a ride! Think of that, you beauty!"

She stroked the long grey nose he held towards her, blowing inquiry.

"Hurt me? He? You must not lift me, I can mount alone."

She clambered hastily to the saddle, and looked down laughing as she pulled her mantle over her short skirts.

"If I ride over the edge of the world, and never, never come back—why then you can have my Prince to ride home on—you know his ways! Farewell!"

Bridling his handsome head, listening with pride to the jingle of the trappings, Beaugris moved off in obedience to the little rider. Lambert looked after the pair as they left the path for the soft turf of the meadow, and the pace quickened, and the great limbs stretched to their stride. The small figure erect, yet swinging with the swing of the gallop, rose and fell like a wave to the inequalities of the sward; then was lost to sight round a bend.

"What a maid! What a maid!" he cried.

"A man would be no man at all who would let her shrivel up behind those white walls yonder."

And as he waited he repeated more than once—

"A sin ! Surely even in the eyes of our Lady Saint Mary a sin ! English she may be, as I may call myself, since I was born in Clee yonder ; but no dull Saxon mother ever bore such a girl-child as that ! "

In which he was more correct than he knew, for Jehane's mother had been a Dane, and the same sea-rovers' blood ran in her veins as in his, though they had come to Clee by different channels.

"All Saints ! " he cried, as she came galloping back, her hair, shaken loose, a background of cloud for her face. "She is sweet as a flower, and bright as a flame, and true as the north star ! God grant that when she learns love I may be her schoolmaster ! "

"How beautifully he goes," cried Jehane as she slipped from the saddle, "when I was little I used to wish I could ride on one of the great eagles that come from the hills of Wales and fly over the forest. But I do not believe that even they go swifter and smother than he. If I were rich—oh ! "

In tossing back her hair ready to roll it under her hood, her hands had encountered the gold cross, which had flown from its hiding-place in her breast.

"Oh-h!" she cried, dismay in her voice, her mouth drooping, her eyes suddenly piteous, "I had forgot again! good-bye, good-horse; good-bye, Lord Lambert. A storm is coming, hark to the thunder! Here, Prince! Nay, be not jealous and toss your head at me! Old friends are better than new, be their legs never so short!"

She mounted hastily.

"If that cross in your hand," said Lambert gravely, "serves for a symbol of the holy life, let it also serve to remind you of him who gave it. He does not always break his promises."

She could not answer, and Lambert said no more, only he watched her go with eyes very bright and parted lips and a smile that was almost fierce.

She rode with averted face, but though she wept she held up her head, and only when she was too far away for tears to be visible did she wave a hand and cry—

"Good-bye, Lord Lambert, God be with you!"

To which he replied from where he stood—

"God go with you, Jehane!"

He did not mount, but walked slowly by his horse's side, and all the way, except where the path dipped to a hollow, he could see the pony and its rider. Even half a mile away, when they crossed the ford, he could distinguish in the clear

storm-weather, a dark dot in the sparkling water. The last glimpse he had, they were scrambling up the steep path for Clee through the manor-woods of Ribeford.

"A year," he said, "for a year she is safe. And before that year is out, I must in all courtesy pay a visit to my kinswoman the Abbess. Meanwhile I am pledged to be a guest at the tanner's wedding! Well, for such a maid I would do a great deal more than that!"

He smiled with set teeth, a smile of confidence.

"Nay, kinswoman, nay, pious sisters, that glorious hair grew not to its length to fall beneath your holy scissors!"

Then he smiled a third time, in yet another fashion; and musingly drew a lock of his own hair across his lips.

CHAPTER XIV

THE GRACIOUS RULE OF SAINT BENET

THE first months of Jehane's novitiate were far from being unhappy ones.

The idea of a young girl entering a convent, and so resigning her whole heritage of wifedom and motherhood, as well as her bodily freedom, and devoting her young strength to monotonous toil, fruitless hardships, and perpetual devotions, has, to us, something terrible about it. That the light of her eyes should be quenched in vigils and fasts, her cheerful voice be tuned to psalms and antiphons instead of laughter and cradle-songs, is, in our eyes, repulsive. But to women of an elder day, such a life appeared beautiful, or, at worst, its pains and deprivations were accepted unquestioningly, as the pains and deprivations of free maidhood are accepted by an unmarried woman of to-day. The life was busy, ordered secure; and those who led it never doubted it to be the best possible life: this made for content;

so did also the fact, known to all, that the convent was the only place of safety for a woman who could not be under the personal protection of father or husband. It was the refuge, too, of that class of woman, in the majority in every age, to whom freedom is no joy, but a burden. Many loved the life, and those who suffered acutely were few.

As for Jehane, the day of her vows seemed so far off, she seldom thought about it.

The House of Saint Mary was no strange place to her, but the familiar home of her childhood. It was in the gentle arms of the nuns that Pargeter had laid her when, in one of those years of famine and fever that raged periodically in the turbulent, starving, fighting England of King Stephen, there was no place of safety for a man to set up a home. He had carried her from her dead mother's side, and with little Ursula clinging patient to his mantle's hem, had knocked upon the convent door and given both to the keeping of the Virgin until better days.

So the great doors had no terrors for her, when she rode to them in the noon after her parting with the Lord of Gubenhale. The clouds, rising in every quarter, overwhelmed the blue, and thunder answered the signal of fire, and the falling rain was plain to see on the eastern hills.

Being a former pupil, The rule of the Five Knockings in Vain was remitted in her behalf, and she was allowed to enter at once.

Few occurrences would have given the Lady Abbess more surprise than the appearance of Jehane, daughter of Pargeter, as a postulant; but she did not show it, and added no personal questions when the girl, brought before her for her first examination, prostrated herself.

"What is this mercy that thou askest?" said the slow sad voice.

"The mercy of God, and yours. To dwell in this place in the habit of religion, to serve God and for to punish my sins, and for amendment of my life, and finally for salvation of my soul."

As Jehane thus replied, according to the book and sister Constance's instructions, she realized that though she desired all these good things, she would not for any, no, nor for all of them, have donned the holy habit of religion, and left her father and sister and the dear wild wood. She was a little disappointed, and would have welcomed a more rigid questioning, the evasion of which would have given substance to her sense of sacrifice in the cause of Ursula's happiness.

But when the exposition was over, and the signing of the rule that is "hard and strait," the Abbess spoke only the formal charge.

"Behold the law under which thou desirest to fight. If thou canst observe it, enter in; if thou canst not, depart freely." Then the equally formal dismissal—

"Dear daughter, God of His good grace give you perseverance. Go with thy mistress in the name of Christ."

So she went with Sister Constance, the mistress of the novices, and knew nothing of the interview which took place the next day between her father and the Lady Emma.

"Leave her to me, my good man," the holy dame said, "for if, as you imagine, it is caprice, or temper, or any other worldly matter that has led your daughter to fly to the arms of Mary, the winter will cure her of her aspirations. But if, on the other hand, she is led by the spirit of God, I am assured that you will not hinder her from pursuing the hard path that leads to the sure salvation. Leave her awhile to the working of her own mind and the Gracious Rule of Saint Benet."

"My lady," answered Pargeter, listening even as he spoke if haply he might catch Jehane's voice from the cloister below, "I am constrained to leave in your charge the one who is dearest in the world to me. Hitherto she has not kept a thought from me. Before I go home alone, may I not speak with her and learn at least why she leaves

us without warning or farewell—I, who have never crossed a wish of hers, and Ursula, who had been mother and sister in one to her? ”

“ You were best leave her to her own thoughts, good franklin, and for this reason, that you understand her not. You know but two girls, your own. I have known hundreds. Let her alone ; ask her no questions, for she would not tell you the truth. No pressure shall be put upon her, and this I promise you that after the third reading of the Rule you shall see and converse with her freely, and if there is the least reluctance in her heart towards the veil, I myself will counsel her to return to you. Surely that will content you? ”

So Pargeter was obliged to trust in the high wisdom of the Abbess, his Lord's near kinswoman, and it must be confessed, that though Jehane's flight had wounded him, and he prayed God to turn her thoughts from the veil, there was a spice of relief in his trouble. The Abbess and the Gracious Rule would take charge of a spirit which was, he acknowledged, a little hard for a plain man to understand.

What chiefly troubled his simple joy and pride was the thought that this little daughter of the frank eyes and caressing lips had hidden a secret under her laughter. It is difficult for a man to have complete trust in a child that can keep a

secret from him ; but happily the child seldom knows this, and it had not occurred to Jehane that her flight would be attributed to any other motive than desire for the holy life, and fear of opposition should she announce her intention.

In this frame of mind, Pargeter went home to Ursula.

On the whole, Jehane enjoyed the winter. It was not, of course, quite so merry for a novice as for a pupil, but with all its restrictions, the life gave room for companionship with girls of her own age, there was variety of occupation, there were books to read and beasts to be loved. It was the weak, the idle, the luxury-ridden who found the rule so "hard and strait," and Jehane was none of the three ; she neither feared work nor discomfort.

Truly a Benedictine convent in those early days was no home of sloth. It was a self-contained and self-supporting community, with no poor lay-sisters, much less secular serving-maids, to spare the sisters drudgery. That was for a later day.

At Saint Mary's of Clee, in the days of Earl John, under the rule of Lady Emma, his sister, the garden, farm and poultry yard, well, orchard,



bee-close, as well as more strictly domestic offices, were within the walls, and the day from prime to compline was hardly long enough for all that had to be done in it. The Abbess, by mouth of the prioress, ordained the tasks even of the lowliest. To Jehane she allotted a full measure of active occupation. From bakehouse to garden, from hospital to poultry-yard, from storehouse to spinning-wheel, from kitchen to cloister, an hour to this, an hour to that ; the day punctuated by prayer and holy office, in instant obedience to word, or sign, or bell.

But the energy of her healthy young body made light of this ceaseless toil, and it was noticed that when the novices, roused on the tick of midnight by the pitiless matins bell, were marched along the icy corridor half asleep in their night-robes to the chapel, and Jehane as junior took up the lantern and led the way, she alone of all the shivering troop was alert and smiling. It was a saying in the convent that one who could smile at matins must be as happy as God.

Her good spirits were no doubt partly due to the fact that she was pleased with herself, and touched with the vicious habit of mind common in communities professionally holy, of musing on the beauty of self-sacrifice and the treasures laying up in heaven for those who practise it. But

more often she thought of Ursula and her joy when Edwy should again be the true lover.

She busied herself too with a duty set her by her conscience which she conceived to be of the first importance ; namely to erase Edwy's image from her thoughts.

Once let Jehane see a duty before her, and she marched straight for it. In the present case, having marched up to her duty, she felt as a general might, who, having led his forces to the walls of a castle, finds, upon challenging the garrison, that he has before him an empty and defenceless ruin.

For she was not one to give her heart where her scorn had gone, and she had scorned Edwy more or less ever since he had kissed her on the eve of his betrothal to Ursula. In the convent school she had read many histories of the Virgin Martyrs with Saint Agnes at their head, and had wondered what this chastity might be that was of so much more value than life—this power in whose name girls younger than herself smiled in horrible tortures, a power before which dragons and devils and even great Satan himself trembled and grovelled ; which worked miracles and had the shining hosts of heaven at the beck of its servants. Now she wondered no more, for, in the charcoal-pit, she had had a fearful, hasty glimpse of its

opposite. In Edwy, and in herself ; for what is unchaste if to accept a caress from the unloved is not ?

Love is great as the sea, manifold as forest trees. Jehane had loved Edwy once with her fancy, and once with her sex ; but never with her heart and soul—they were not easily won. Now her fancies had fallen from him, he had lowered himself in her eyes, lowered her in her own eyes, and she faintly disliked, but neither loved nor hated him.

She thought over this departed sentiment quite frankly ; indeed she filled the hours of mechanical toil with memories that were all frank. With memories only, never with plans. She mused often, for instance, on her talk with Lord Lambert under the wild apple-tree, and of her ride on Beaugris ; but upon the promise that had been made her, and the hopes that promise had inspired, she did not permit herself to dwell. She was happy in her novice's life because she would have it so ; to picture the future would have been as foolish for her as it would be for a mariner to bore a hole in his ship's bottom when it rocks on an unplumbed sea ; and, in a sense, Jehane was wise of her years.

The events of the autumn and winter may be summed up in a few extracts from the Chronicles

of the Abbey, under date of the months in which they occurred.

"In August a certain Jehane, daughter of Pargeter, applied for admission as a novice, and her name was entered in the roll of novices."

"In September the herd of convent swine, pasturing in the oak-woods under the charge of a churl by name Eadwulf, were attacked by Earl John's hounds, and were killed to the number of five. Eadwulf was also much bitten.

"In October compensation was paid by the Earl to the Abbess, and smart-money to the churl. In October also the Abbess departed on a visit to her sister the Countess of Shrewsbury. The drought caused a great murrain among cattle over all the border; but the oxen of the convent were spared, owing to the merits of Our Lady, the prayers of the sisters, and the abundance of pure water in the domain.

"In November the Lady Abbess returned, having been absent eighteen days. She was met by the whole community in solemn procession.

"In December Earl John attended the Christmas mass, accompanied by Lord Lambert and many nobles. He brought gifts of a buck and a doe for the convent, and promised a great oak from the forest for the building of a new barn.

"In January Sister Mary, who, through the Good

Providence of the Redeemer, had suffered from a grievous affliction for six years, was lifted up to heaven by her good works as by cords. Sister Elgitha fell sick, and sister Martha took her place as portress.

"In February a deep snow fell, and lay for four weeks and three days. By its weight many branches were broken from the fruit-trees. A great flood bore away the houses and goods of the men of Gubenhale.

"In April the novice Jehane read the rule for the third time, and Elizabeth the novice read the Rule for the fourth time and was ordained to the Holy Life and took her stall."

Thus it was in April that Jehane's fate took up the threads of her life again and hastened her spinning.

Each novice, eight months after her admission, reads aloud before the whole convent the Rule and the Exhortation to depart freely if she cannot with her whole heart vow to obey it. After that there is but one more reading, the final irrevocable one, at the hour of ordination.

After this third milestone, which was passed early in April, the end seemed to come running towards Jehane like a hound on its prey. A few days later, when she witnessed the ordination of

Elizabeth, she seemed to feel its breath on her.

This Elizabeth, a girl of good Saxon family, was an old schoolmate of Jehane's and her chief friend among the novices ; a gentle girl whom she could plague and caress by turns, and who, if she gave but partial understanding, gave sympathy at every turn. It was part of her creed that whatever Jehane did was right, and if to her it did not seem right, that must be because of her own lack of understanding. God grant us each, among our friends, at least one friend like this !

With Jehane under its roof, the convent held all of the world that Elizabeth cared to enjoy ; freedom to pray was all the freedom she asked. Devoted to the service of the Virgin from her birth, she had never wavered in her steady desire for the day when she should speak the vows that can never be unspoken ; a day which came a week after Jehane's third reading.

"When I stand before you all to-morrow, Jehane," she said, "and sing my 'suspice me,' the angels will just smile and say, 'Ah, Elizabeth, is that you?' but when they hear your voice, they will join in one glorious harmony, and weave a great fair crown ready for your death day."

At that Jehane laughed at her, tormented her, bewildered her with nonsense, and brought down penance on them both for frivolity.

The day of the ordination was a warm one, and wafts of spring drifted into the winter-cold air of the chapel. Such days bring dreams, holy trances, visions, faintings, and the gift of tears to convent dwellers.

Terce that day was unusually solemn, and when it was over Father Giles celebrated the special mass for the occasion. In the pause ensuing, Elizabeth's father, a burly franklin, came from the seats of the secular, disturbing the secluded air with his heavy mundane tread, and looked along the row of young faces. Putting out a great hand, he took his daughter from among them, leading her to the altar, gave her into the hands of the church for ever.

Then Jehane, and three of her fellows, who had been meekly waiting behind, advanced, led by an old nun carrying a set of new garments. These the novices held up one by one for the priest to bless, and standing about her in a circle clad Elizabeth in them, dressing her lovingly as a bride is dressed, arranging all in order—habit, veil wimple, and the girdle which fastens the habit, and which must henceforward, both night and day, be girded about her body. And the grey robe of her novitiate was borne away.

Even in this hour of exaltation Elizabeth came for a moment to earth and looked at her friend with loving anxiety when Jehane's fingers touched

her forehead, so cold they were ; but her glance won no response ; Jehane's eyes had no expression, her brow no line, her red pursed lips no movement.

And now Elizabeth must bend her head while the Abbess, with hallowed scissors, used for no other purpose, cut off the thick flaxen hair Jehane had so often combed. So long it was that it would have touched the floor had she not taken it in both hands as she carried it to the altar to be laid there side by side with the parchment on which the rule was written out fair and full and signed by her own hand. It was with happy, unfeigned composure she laid them down and turned towards the assembly, chanting her vows for all to hear, while the priest wrapped her hands in the altar-cloth.

"I, Sister Elizabeth, given to God

"I promise all stableness and turning of my
manners

"And obedience after the rule of Saint Benet.

"This before God and all His Hallows.

"In His Mynster that is set in the worship

"Of the Mother of God Saint Mary of Petitions

"In the Earldom of Earl John the Lord of Clee

"In the presence of Lady Emma the Abbess

"And of Dame Gertrude, Prioress, and of all the
holy sisterhood."

Then, descending to the lower step of the altar, she sang the "Suspice me," and the congregation answered her steady intoning. Then the kiss of peace was given and the veil fastened solemnly down ; for three days it might not be raised, but would remain fastened to betoken that as our Lord rose after three days in the tomb, so she who was now dead to the world might in three days rise to the better life.

Lastly the new-made nun crossed to the right side of the altar, and there cast herself full-length upon the ground, while Father Giles stood over her, and with singing of orisons, with casting of holy water, and with waving of censers, the earthly body was consecrated to the heavenly life, as long as its life should last ; the incense-smoke made the black form grey in the eyes of her watching fellows.

Chant and prayer, chant and prayer, and the black-robed form of her playfellow prone on the altar steps :—this it was that would often return to Jehane in dreams.

The ceremony was over ; the eucharist administered ; Father Giles had gone, the Abbess and the sisters had gone ; the novices, too, each to her separate duty ; and in the silent chapel the new-made nun was left to prayer and fasting.

Jehane's task that day took her to the garden, there to hoe the sweet earth between the cherry-saplings, whose orderly rows stood under the north wall.

Two hours later, when the bell called to refectory, she did not answer the summons. Sister Constance cast her eye along the line of hungry novices assembled in the cloister, and hastily questioned them. No one had seen Jehane, so the mistress of the novices herself set out to seek the lost lamb, peering for the grey robe amid the young green of the leaves, her kind heart seeking for reason of grief or illness. Being dim of eye, and now hurried beside, she nearly fell over the object of her search; for on the brown soil Jehane lay on her face. The good soul knelt by her, called her, and would have tried to raise her, but Jehane sat up, endangering Sister Constance's nose with the sudden lift of her head, and stared at her superior in surprise. She was neither weeping nor faint, but drew a deep breath, and said she had not heard the bell.

"Why lie on the ground, damsel, if you are not ill?" she demanded somewhat sternly, vexed after her anxiety, and never quite sure whether Jehane were at her tricks; conscious, too, of the novices waiting for their dinner, and the growing impatience of the bell.

"There was a sister here when I was tiny," answered the defaulter dreamily, "who used to say that when a pure soul gave itself to God, the very worms in the earth sang for joy. And there were so many, and such large ones, that I thought if I listened close I might hear them."

"And did you hear them?" asked the nun, awestruck.

"But faintly."

"I fear that was because you were thinking more of your own gratification than of your plain duty of hoeing away the weeds. Yet you were marvellously favoured to hear at all. Of what did they sing?"

"Of freedom, madame."

Sister Constance crossed herself.

"The freedom, no doubt, of the Heavenly city, of which our Sister Elizabeth is now assured."

She never questioned the great favour which had been granted this novice, and gazed with the utmost veneration at a lively lob which was performing alpine feats over a clod of Jehane's hoeing.

Her senses were none of the keenest, and as she led her charge back to the cloister she did not perceive a thin blue vapour which had blown across the forest on the west wind, and leaping the convent wall, brought with it the odour of

burning oak-branches and wet peat—the odour of freedom and the woods.

Even had she done so she would have perceived no connection between this faint scent and Jehane's trance among the cherry-saplings where heaven-inspired worms sang of freedom.

CHAPTER XV

A DAY'S HOLIDAY

IT is difficult to say how much or how little the Lady Abbess believed of the story which Sister Constance bore to her. She listened with complete gravity to the narrative of the trance into which her charge had fallen in the cherry plantation, and the visitation for which she had been selected by heaven ; but she commanded that silence should be observed.

A well-authenticated trance and heavenly voices were things that did credit to a convent, and gave importance to a sister of novices, and it was to Sister Constance a hard thing that her lips should be sealed by her superior's orders, though the Abbess did her best to soften her disappointment by kind expressions of trust.

Jehane, called in her turn to the august presence, repeated her experience demurely, and was nothing loth to hold her tongue. The worms had served their turn, and she had no ambition to pose as a saint.

Whatever may have been the conclusion the Abbess formed of the incident, it did not hinder her from fulfilling her promise to Pargeter that he should have free speech with his daughter before the time came for her veiling.

Had Jehane been a great lady, with jewels and title-deed to lay on the altar with her hair, when she resigned all earthly good in favour of a heavenly inheritance, it is just possible that the Lady Emma might have interpreted her duty somewhat differently; but to acknowledge this is only to admit that she had the temporal as well as the moral welfare of the community she ruled at heart. As it was, she gave Jehane permission to spend a whole day at her father's house, and that she might have the more liberty, allotted her as companion and protectress on the way, her own friend Elizabeth.

The novices, and as many of the nuns as were weak, were permitted to go to bed again after matins until prime; but upon the morning of Jehane's leave of absence, neither she nor Elizabeth regretted the loss of this usually precious nap. The days were long and light now in the high summer, and even before matins was over the chapel windows were greying for dawn. By three o'clock the pair had set forth in their best robes,

their knives, well polished, by their sides, and their shoes of ceremony on their feet ;—this last not to their comfort, for sandals for matins and outdoor labour, barefoot beside, was a sumptuary law of Saint Mary's, and the shoes were stiff. They had hoped that a couple of the convent mules might be allotted them for the long six miles, but orders were that they should go afoot, though Jehane secretly believed that it would not be for the whole way.

Their road was one that ran over hills dividing narrow vales, each with its watercourse. Some of these brooks were so tiny that now in the hot weather they were wholly hidden and their voices so weak that the scolding of a wren or the bustle of the light breeze in a bush could drown them. Some were larger, and the last they crossed, the brook Dowlas, being the outcome of the brooks that met in Shadrachs, was quite a wide stream. Brown it ran, with guelder-rose and elder-blossom bowing, dew-heavy, over it, while wag-tails and kingfishers, dippers and mumruffins skimmed under the branches, catching flies for the new-hatched young. As the girls came through the streaks of mist down the steep path where a felled tree made a bridge, the mill on the brook-side, beginning work early, started humming like a great bee ; and at that they laughed without reason, or

with no more reason than the birds had for singing.

How they sang that morning! Birds haunt the dwellings of men and the land of his cultivation; for one voice that would have been heard in the lonelier stretches of forest, there were fifty here, by brook and mill, with convent and castle none so far away but that each small bird, rising to clear the trees, could see cultivated fields, men and ploughing oxen. The air was full of rejoicing, and through it, tolling like a knell, though doubtless prompted by a happy heart, came the croak of a land-rail from meadows out of sight.

At first the girls could hardly realize their lot. Through the mists a glory rose from the sun, towards which they climbed over dust that was pitted with the moisture dropping from the leaves, bathed and saturated with the sweet summer mists.

"Elizabeth dear, will you please pinch me? Thank you, but I mean hard—much harder than that! I am afraid I have grown into an image. My hands do not look like wood to be sure, and my legs work quite easily, so perhaps it has begun in my heart. Just think! I have not seen father and Ursul' for *eight—long—months*! And here I am as sober as—as a prioress! Do I look like

a prioress? Or do you think a vocation is descending upon me? Shall I like it, I wonder?"

Just at this point of Jehane's idle speech, at which Elizabeth only smiled, they reached the summit of the last hill. Mists were left behind at the brook-side, and now, surmounting the rise, Hoar Cross stood in view at the end of a straight stretch running south-eastward, so that the rising sun himself stood at the end of it like a glorious goal to race to down the golden track.

The cross itself was silhouetted against the almost intolerable brightness, and at its base Jehane's strong eyes could make out something that was neither bush, deer, nor cattle.

"Oh, look, look! It is father and Ursul' and Paynim and my dear Prince! They have come to meet us—I knew they would! Hark! Father is winding his horn! Oh, carry my shoes, dear!"

She pulled them off, tugging at the stiff thongs, and crying—

"What is the penance for running? Never mind, I will pay it whatever it is! Father! Dear father! Ursul'! Ursul'! Here I am!"

There was little of the statue, or the maid with a vocation for the veil, in the rosy girl who scampered along the road, breathless, her grey robe flying to the knee. Her hood fallen back, released the long locks, her bare feet made

the dust fly, as she sprang towards them, laughing, talking, and finally weeping and drying her eyes on her hair.

Elizabeth followed more sedately, but her eyes were bright and her face rosy as she held out her hands.

"You?" cried Ursula, "professed already? And sent to take care of Jehane, as a sober and discreet sister!"

"Of course!" replied Jehane, "did you think they would let me come alone? I believe father did, for he has brought nothing for Elizabeth to ride!"

"Nay, nay," said Pargeter, "I never thought they would let so wild a hawk fly without the jesses, but I hardly expected so young a falconer. I looked for something with weight and wrinkles, somewhat more like Sister Magdalene, or Sister Agneta, either of whom would as soon think of mounting a bear as one of these ponies of yours. You can see the heap of rugs I brought to lay on Paynim's saddle for her; I intended to lead him so that the old lady should not be alarmed. Will you jump up? It is still the same Elizabeth—the wimple changes you little; but you were always sedate, not like this wild bird of mine."

There was a hesitation, which was broken by Jehane.

"In that way we should have to go walking pace! No, that will never do. I will tell you what, father, you shall take me behind you on the pillion, and we'll talk, talk, talk all the way, and you shall tell me the news. Then Elizabeth can ride my Prince, and Ursula her own Pretty."

This plan being found good, they turned along the grassy shaded road, Jehane's arms tight round her father, but never too tight for him who had not felt them for so long, her cheek at his shoulder, her lips at his ear, as the horse padded along on the soft moss, cold and grey with dew, so scented, so kindly to the feet of wayfarers.

The Rule of Saint Benet, though permitting both to nun and novice a day of liberty when needful for health or business or for the comforting of sick parents, forbids them on their return to utter so much as a word to their cloistered sisters of anything that has chanced to themselves, or come to their ears of the mundane life. They must not pander to earthly curiosity. It is not a rule easily enforced, indeed there have been occasions when it has been broken; but though since Jehane's admission several sisters had been outside, it so happened that no news of the neighbourhood had reached her.

Now, as she rode behind her father, she chattered fast as a pie, but he found that though he learned

much of the life of Saint Mary's, he was no nearer what he most craved to know, Jehane's mind towards it. As they went further into the forest, she listened more, questioned more, and chattered less.

Presently she looked back, and beckoned to the pair riding behind, her face sparkling with delight, her voice breaking into ripples that were half merriment, half tenderness.

"So you left it to father to tell me? Call you that sisterly?"

"You have given me small chance to tell you anything," laughed Ursula, "you preferred your news from father, so I let you have your way."

"And Lord Lambert, forsooth! How proud you must be! What brought him to your wedding?"

"That none of us know. He came all in his arms, with Wulf behind him, and he was most gracious. If he had not been so high above us, we should have asked him to the feast, so gracious was his mien. He even brought us gifts. What think you? A sword for Edwy, in place of the one that was broken, and for me a lovely pouch of white kid, worked in gold thread:—'tis the most exquisite needlework I ever saw! But if you ask me why he was so condescending,

that none of us can tell. They said the countess ever wished him to have respect for the English, but he cannot go to all his vassals' weddings! Perchance you can tell us."

"I? I must suppose it was respect for father—unless it was a penance he set himself because he so nearly caused Edwy to die a bachelor. Has Edwy quite recovered? Or does he still need you to brush his hair? So you live at home and he rides daily to Clee? That is a fine arrangement. And do you like being married? Is it a worthy estate?—Father, Ursula is as red as a rose and she looks so pretty! Is she not pretty, Sister Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth laughed her soft laugh, but slackened speed, and called Ursula's attention to the first wild-rose of the year, lest she should feel it her duty to report the novice under her charge for passing the bounds of spareness and soberness of speech.

When they arrived at the dwelling, and Jehane's first rapture was over, Pargeter again tried to learn her mind; but he met with no success. Jehane had always had her own wilful way with him; and now, even if she had tried, she could not have told him her own mind in the matter of the future.

In the early afternoon, in the silence when every beast is slumbering and every bird mute,

the sisters sat under the silver birches, while Elizabeth, in much content, strolled up the path and left them to themselves. A great hope was growing in Jehane's heart, so that she was serious under the greatness of it.

"Are you really, really happy, Ursula?" she said more than once.

"Truly happy—happier than ever in my life! If you were with us still as you used to be, my joy would be quite perfect. It has no other flaw."

"Oh! Is Edwy happy too?"

"I think so. I hope so. Yes, I am sure of it. And he is so strong, stronger than ever."

"Would it complete his joy, too, to have me at home again?"

"He would be glad, I am sure. He does not often talk of you, but he always liked you, and found in you something I ever lacked. He will regret he was away to-day. Why should you not come home, Jehane?"

The words were spoken like words that had been long waiting.

"You think it quite impossible for me to love the holy life for its own sake, I suppose?"

"No—no, not impossible. But it is not like your ways to depart secretly, without good-bye, or a word to either father or me. You might have remembered that we have never opposed any real

wish of yours. We all thought that something had occurred while you were away in the forest, that had led you to so sudden a resolution. Edwy could think of nothing, and was terribly upset. He fell into a fever over it."

"Poor soul! But he had you to nurse him. Did not that old swineherd bring you a message? Surely I sent him to bid you farewell for me."

"Yes, he came, but not until evening, when the storm had abated, and you had been received by then. Say what you will, Jehane, I am sure there were other thoughts in your heart beside love of the Virgin, so why hide them? You need not fear I will tell your secret, if it is a secret. Even my husband shall never know. There is nothing you need fear to tell me. Trust me, little sister!"

Jehane hid her face a moment on Ursula's shoulder; then looked up with a baffling expression Ursula knew well.

"You are right. It was not pure love of the Holy Life. There was another reason, and I did well to keep it for my own. Yet, as all goes so well here, I need no longer hide it. You may even tell Edwy. I had a dream."

"You have many."

"Yes, but this one was different. In this dream

I was here, where we are now. And I looked at the sky through the trees, just as I am looking now. And there came an eagle flying through the air over the forest from the mountains. It lighted on the house and began tearing the thatch so savagely that I was afraid it would make its way through. Then in my dream a little magpie came from the wood, and chased the eagle back to the mountains, and our house was saved. I told my dream to none, lest you should keep me back, for I was sure it was a warning from Heaven, and that only by putting on the black robe and white wimple could I save you all from destruction. And you see that since I have been at Saint Mary's all has gone well with you."

"If there are eagles abroad we had rather have you with us and fight them all together. Dreams sometimes lie. I will ask Father Giles what he thinks of the matter. It would be of little use to ask the Abbess, she would be so loth to lose you."

Jehane, sitting with her feet twisted tailorwise under her, smiled in her sister's face knowingly, with enjoyment, seeing that Ursula believed little of her dream. Frank lying was a favourite weapon of hers when her privacy was assailed.

So they sat, until Ursula's laugh echoed Jehane's.

"So you and Edwy are truly happy," she said,

unabashed. "How it pleases me to hear that! But it is time we set out. It is an unkind rule that forbids us to take bite or sup while we are away; a foolish rule, if I dare say so, for the thought of your plum pasties which I saw within chases all holiness out of me, and poor dear Elizabeth will be starved outright. We shall get no supper, and must be quick to claim even our *potum caritatis*. It is the price we pay for our day's holiday, Elizabeth! It is time we started."

"But a moment, Jehane," said Ursula, in unwonted hurry. "I have another thing—I would tell you before you go."

"Speak it then, quickly."

"I cannot—I cannot! Yet I want you to know! Edwy and I——"

"Edwy and you—well, Edwy and you what? What is the matter with you?"

Elizabeth was approaching.

"Well then—Edwy and I are going to have a baby—there!"

Jehane stared, then kissed heartily, then whispered—

"I have a secret to tell also."

"What?" cried Ursula, "tell me quick, dear—I have kept naught from you—oh, for our mother's sake, keep naught from me!"

"'Tis this," said Jehane with solemnity, her

hands on Ursula's shoulders, her eyes gazing deeply into hers with the gravity of a kitten, "my hair is yet upon my head! No, speak not another word to me. I am going to find father. Come, Elizabeth, we must start!"

Elizabeth came across the Space, Pargeter from the orchard, and presently the four started for Hoar Cross, to part where they had met. The day's holiday was over.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ORCHARD WALL

THE final month of Jehane's novitiate had wasted its first week. Ever since her visit home she had passed the time in a fever of unrest, of longing and of dread. Now she had ceased to debate, ceased to dread, for she had come to the conclusion that her sacrifice would not be required. Now that Edwy and Ursula were man and wife, soon to be father and mother, Edwy's sentiment for herself must necessarily be a thing of the past. If he cherished even a memory of his past feeling for her he would be wicked, and she smiled to call Edwy wicked even in thought. She had been right to come to Saint Mary's, her prompt action had saved both Edwy and Ursula, and she was very pleased with herself for it ; but its work was done, and now the time had come to go home and be happy.

Every morning she thought, "To-day I will tell her ladyship the Abbess that my mind has changed,

that I feel I have no true vocation, and to-day she will give me permission to go home."

But the Lady Emma was unwell, and Jehane put off the interview, since she had no love for the prioress, to whom she must tell her will in the Abbess' absence; the prioress was very difficult to deceive, and remarkably sharp of tongue.

But Lady Emma grew no better, and the novices were beginning to talk about Jehane's ordination.

Now that she had made up her mind that she need not take the veil, she dared for the first time to realize what it would have been. Now that the journey need never be completed, she could look ahead at the fearful goal. The knowledge of what she had escaped, filled all the hours of prayer, and most of those of work, with fervent thanksgiving to the Great Virgin who had refrained from demanding what it would have been beyond her power to give.

Beyond her power?

"Oh, Blessed One, I know not!" she would reply to her own questioning; "I could die for my Ursula, but to live all my life in the Holy Discipline—oh, merciful heart that did not ask it! Every day will I give thanks for thy kindness unmatched and undeserved!"

Thankfulness shone within her like the flame

within a lamp, and Elizabeth thought it love of heaven and joy at her approaching ordination that made her friend so beautiful. Rather was she like one who, recovering from a sickness, finds the very air she breathes, and the water she drinks, wonderful, and would welcome even pain as a kindly evidence that she still lives.

How had she borne it all these months? Surely she must have been drowsy as a bee in winter, or she would have died of the horror; now so joyous and light was her spirit that she could play with the thought of what she had escaped, bask in the waiting on the sure joys to come:—home, freedom, love, and the forest.

The choice early apples were ripe in the orchard close.

There were as yet but five trees of the sort in bearing; but those five, what a source of pride to every inmate of the convent! The grafts had been brought by Earl John across the sea from the orchard of Fort-Castel, and had taken kindly to English soil, and bore fruit that in all the kingdom had not its equal for flavour, size, and beauty. Even the king could pluck none such without crossing the sea.

Who should help in the gathering but Jehane the light climber, the fearless, the sure-footed?

The simple nuns flattered and made much of her for the occasion.

There was one of the five trees which had ever been a subject of debate and of regret among the sisterhood. Whether by fault of stock or graft or pruning, or because it stood overnear the wall, or merely from some eccentricity in its own character, it had shot up half as tall again as its fellows ; " more like a pear than an apple," the nuns would say, looking up with shaded eyes reproachfully at the inaccessible fruit, feeling it so sad a pity that the best apples, the largest, reddest and sweetest, must be shaken down and be bruised in falling, so as to be fit for nothing but the common cider-heap.

There was much rejoicing, therefore, when Jehane confidently undertook to climb above the ladder's top and gather the ripe fruit by hand.

The day had come. One apple had fallen for sheer ripeness, and a wind would now bring them all down together. So in the cool of early morning, as soon as prime was over, Jehane was bidden to the orchard, her allotted companion being gentle, somnolent Sister Magdalene, whose besetting sin was untimely slumber for which she laid the blame on a certain fiend with a torch, the smoke of which (she said) affected her eyes so much that they closed against her will. Much she prayed and much penance bore, but rarely kept awake through either prayer or

punishment. It was a wise coupling, for it was not every novice who would refrain from mischief under such slack supervision, or who would take the trouble to wake the good sister, if the prioress was seen approaching.

The nun sat upon the grass with the great basket, while the novice, out of sight among the foliage, gathered the apples far overhead into a small one, So high they grew that the girl in the swaying branches could see the forest outside. Down in the still air below, the nun's head grew heavy, and her ample chin sank slowly towards her breast; sleep is sweet in a still August orchard, and so deep was her slumber that even when a large apple fell close to her dreaming nose and a sharp exclamation followed it, she did not wake, but only muttered "ave" in her dreams.

Jehane had been gathering diligently but without haste, musing as she gathered, climbing down with her little basket to empty it into the large one, and climbing up again for another load. As soon as she was level with the top of the wall she could see over it into the woods, where the grove of oaks stretched this way, the chestnuts that, all dignified trees, with short grass at their roots, green even now, after the summer's heat.

She looked at the woods with the gaze an exile, pardoned and repatriated, might cast upon the

cliffs of his own country, the roofs of his own town, as, on his ship beyond the bar, he waits with glad patience for the favouring wind that will blow him to the harbour.

On the outside of the wall a young oak had taken root and had grown unnoticed to a tall ladder-like sapling.

When Jehane cried out and dropped the apple so close to Sister Magdalene's nose, it was because she saw a man's face in the oak, quite close to her own—Edwy's.

After the one cry she stared dumb at him ; then whispered—

“ What has happened ? What—what has happened ? ”

Some mishap was all she could think of to explain such an apparition.

“ Nothing has happened.”

“ Why are you here, then ? Why are you pale ? Does Ursula need me ? Or—ah !—is it father ? ”

“ Nothing is wrong. All are well. Had it been aught of that kind I should have sought the Abbess, but I wanted a sight of you, a word alone with you, and that I knew I should not get though I went on my knees for it. I have been on the wall a score of times watching for you. I heard the talk of the apple-gathering a week ago. I—I have a word to say.”



"A word? Not more than one, I hope! Sister Magdalene is expecting me."

"It is only——" He seemed short of breath.

"Be quick! If you were found here, I do not know what your punishment would be, but mine would be with stripes."

"It is only this—come back, come back to us, Jehane!"

"Why do you say this to me now that the day of my vows is so near?" asked Jehane shrewdly.

"I heard of the day you spent at home, and the speech you had with Ursula. It made me fear that perchance it was that old folly of mine that drove you out, that it was my fault we are all desolate for lack of you. And so I came that I might put right that folly I did!"

"That was a very kind thought of yours. But why do you speak so unlike yourself?"

"It is so long—you have grown so much—that is all!"

"Oh. And you think you would be happier if I were at home?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"And Ursula? You are equally sure she would be happier?"

"Your thoughts do me wrong. You need not fear me!"

"Then you are wiser now than you were last summer?"

"God is my witness! Only come home, and you will see!"

"Ah, well. It was a good thought and kind of you to come and tell me that I have no more to fear from that ancient folly. I do not promise, yet I would fain be home. Farewell."

"Wait a minute. Will you not promise?"

"Why will you make me talk longer? 'Tis a mercy Sister Magdalene's fiend is so lively to-day. Farewell!"

Tip-toeing upon her branch, she reached above her head for her basket with its pretty load, and taking less heed than she should have done, she slipped, and to save herself caught at what was nearest, which as it happened was Edwy, who had drawn himself up astride on the wall.

He felt her hand catch at his mantle, felt her weight across his knee, and the virtue in which he had placed such honest faith suddenly fell to pieces. He drew Jehane to him and held her fast in shaking arms.

In the first moment she was breathless at the danger and thankful for his aid; but when, with pursed lips to caution him to silence, she put out hand and foot again for the branches, he dragged her to him, and, stupid with passion, kissed her

face, her neck, her hair, panting "forgive" even as he did it.

Regardless that they were twenty feet from the ground, Jehane struggled with him. It seemed impossible that they should escape falling. First on one side, towards the forest, then on the other, hanging over the orchard, they swayed, wrestling silently. Further—further—then, both at once, they saw the green grass far beneath them, and the tiny black figure of the nun with the basket. Both turned sick and giddy, clung with scraping finger to the rough coping, held for life to one another, desire and wrath both killed on the spot by terror.

But balance regained and the awful moment past, Jehane again put out hand and foot for the branches, and steadied herself for the descent.

Edwy, doubled to hold the wall, was a piteous sight, his face white, twitching, wet.

"Forgive! Oh, for God's Son's sake, forgive! You know not the power—forgive!"

Slowly she turned to him, with no pity at all, but sheer cold fury.

"Forgive?" she said. "The holy martyrs forgave those who slew them, and perchance one day I shall forgive you. As yet I am not holy enough."

At the clang of the bell summoning to refectory, Sister Magdalene awoke, and saw Jehane sitting

on the grass, her hands clasping her ankles, her head upon her knees. The good sister was alarmed. Had she fallen? Was she ill?

Jehane vaguely confessed to "a pain," but vowed it was better, climbed for her forgotten basket, still hanging high in the sun, and smiled once to relieve the kind nun's anxiety.

So she must take the veil. Hope was gone, and death, speedy death, was the one thing to pray for.

As for Lord Lambert's words, spoken nearly a twelvemonth since, and by this time no doubt forgotten, what was there to hold by in them?

Besides, it was well known, even within the convent walls, that he was, these four months past, fast besieged in Gubenhale by the greedy house of Mortimer.

CHAPTER XVII

LORDS MARCHERS

GREAT on the Marches was the power of Hugh de Mortimer of Wigmore. The day was at hand when it would be reduced, but that day was still in a dubious future ; the young king's hands were full, and in his absence the Mortimer's power was second only to the Chancellor's.

He was lord of more castles than can at this distance easily be counted. They lay like a rosary thrown in semi-circle from Upper Severn to Upper Wye ; a rosary of which the greater beads were Bridgnorth (held in flagrant defiance of the Crown), Lydbury, Knighton, Brampton Brian, and Wigmore, even as far south as Norton, which is less than a day's march from Hereford.

The day had not yet come when Henry, casting an eye on this great wall which defended his western realm from the incursions of the Welsh, should deem it too great for the good of the nation, and wrest Bridgnorth and more from the Baron's hand ; the Mortimer's power was still at its zenith.

For all his might, and the army of men that fol-

lowed his banner, there was one thing that fretted him sadly. Further and further into Wales he had pushed his domain, in shape a bow with Severn for its string, or a half-moon, with Severn for its section ; but to his own fancy a bow with a broken string, no half-moon but a crescent with the old moon in its lap. For there in the midst lay the lands of John of Clee ; a small earldom, not for a moment to be evened with his own, but still a goodly tract to lie at the very heart of his barony.

As if this were not enough, it befel that the great main road to England from all the lands west of Severn, the way by which he himself must pass, lay under the very walls of Clee Castle, and the ford by which he must cross the river (in dirty weather the only safe one between Bridgnorth and Worcester) lay in Earl John's demesne ! Earl John, who was ever ready with insult and defiance, who had likened the great Hugh's wrath to a fire of sticks, as easy to dout as to kindle, who measured men neither by lands nor power, but by manhood, and who thought himself the equal of any Mortimer.

Long had Hugh waited for an opportunity to attack and crush him as he had crushed so many another, imprison him in one of his own castles, and add the lands of Clee to the lands of Mortimer ; so should the broken bow-string be mended, the empty crescent filled.

Such being his thought, he smiled when it was told him that John of Clee was building a new castle over against the Ford of the Lax, and designed to put his own son in it as castellan ; and when his friends tried to raise his wrath with stories of its strength and commanding position on river and road, he smiled the more, saying—

“The stronger the better, hinder him not, the good John, he shall build for me and I will furnish ! ”

Men thought he would hardly care to draw the king's eye his way, considering Bridgnorth. But the reign was young, and he did not know Henry so well as he learned him later ; besides the king was engaged in business sufficiently exacting to take a monarch a lifetime to bring to conclusion.

So it happened that as soon as the winter was over, and the floods that follow the melting of the snows in the Welsh mountains had ceased to drown the low lands above Worcester, he sent messengers to Clee, demanding that the new castle of Gubenhale should be instantly dismantled, as being a traitorous erection against the king's peace and the honour of his realm. At the same time he warned Lambert, as castellan, to vacate it without delay, he and his men, under penalty that the great earl would uphold the king's honour by hanging every man of them from its traitorous

towers, and himself hold the castle until his majesty's will concerning it should be known.

These demands being, as they were meant to be, refused, he despatched a force, with his own son at its head, to surround this insolent stronghold, hoping to catch the youthful castellan unprepared.

Finding, on the contrary, that the fortress was well provisioned, he saw there was little prospect of an early surrender ; and, hearing that his men were frequently ambushed, taken in flank, and otherwise harassed by the fierce attacks of Earl John, he sent a second force to invest Clee Castle also.

So the lands and villages on both sides of the river, as far northward as Hoar Cross, and from Hoar Edge to the Stour River, were empty, untilled, and desolate ; the villeins and cottiers, each with oxen and swine, wife and children, took refuge behind their lord's strong walls : all except a few, who, young and unencumbered, preferred to fly to the forest, into the depths of which the Mortimer did not find it worth his while to penetrate.

So Lambert de Fort-Castel was as fast a prisoner within his red walls as Jehane within her white ones.

The colour and pomp of mediæval warfare waged in open field almost suffice to blind us to its terrors ; to the chopping of axes into human brains, to the

torture of the knight dying slowly on the field locked in his steel, to the ghastly wounds of barbed arrows, the primitive surgery or total neglect ; but the siege had little of dignity to cover its horror.

This period was one in which the arts of defence had outgrown the arts of attack. To reduce a castle was often an affair of months, a fortified town of years ; and although, strewn on the surface of the weary weeks, there were some bright moments of sally or attack, of escape or pursuit, there was about the siege as a whole something very sordid.

For since the thick stone walls of the castles which now for the first time dotted the land were impregnable to any weapons the besiegers had at their command, the foe must needs sit down before them in a cruel patience and wait the arrival of his allies. Sooner or later starvation or treachery was bound to come to his aid.

So waited Earl Mortimer's army before Gubenhale. There was small fear of treachery in the little fortress with its young lord, sober and watchful, feared and loved, his foster-brother ever at his right hand, and on the walls picked men, proud of their castle, proud of their lord ; while the churls, huddled in the courtyard, smelling the reek of their burning huts, cursed the Mortimers every morning. No, Gubenhale would not fall by treachery ; it would be the white hand of famine that would

hang out the flag of surrender from its turret's top.

One hope the beseiged had : that of the king's interference. Surely he must know what was doing, far off as he was ; surely it was not by his goodwill that these overgrown nobles harried the lands and beleaguered the castles of those who had always been loyal ; surely he must soon come to their aid !

But he came not, and he came not ; and the meal-bags grew slack, the salted swine's-flesh low in the barrels. Rations were halved, and halved again, till even the men-at-arms, even the Castellan, grew lean ; while the poor churls, huddled in the courtyard, died day by day of famine and fever, and were buried with much labour and little ceremony in the stone of the foundations, lest, being cast outside the walls, the Mortimers should jeer and rejoice and be put in good heart by the sight of their poor thin bodies.

Spring grew to summer in the forest ; the foliage above, the foliage below, grew from sparse and young to thick and green, and the brooks dwindled. The summer was passing.

Though the walls of Gubenhale were raw and new and the stone, not yet weathered, still left red powder on the garment of him who leaned against it ; though the flooring of its hall and the beams of its roof were still the colour of new oak, and the smell

of cut stone and carpenter's work still hung about it; it already bore signs that its short existence had not been altogether a peaceful one.

Here was a brattice broken by the perriers; here a scar, where the enemy one foggy night had attempted to undermine the most vulnerable corner of the wall under shelter of a boarded sow, and had been discovered and driven away with boiling oil poured on their heads through the interstices; here a dark stain and an unburied body marked the spot where the besiegers, weary of working their futile engines, had made their first and last attempt at direct assault, and having filled the ditch with faggots, had rolled their tower to the wall, only to be caught on the bridge by the deadly cross-fire from the gate-towers.

To balance the account, there were other dark stains streaking the wall from several spots on the ramparts, and some dead men-at-arms in their graves under their comrades' feet. The iron of the portcullis, too, was battered, for since idleness is unwholesome and stones cheap, the enemy's battering-ram and perrier had been in constant use, supplying occupation for Lambert's smith, and seasoning the new iron. Within the castle, signs of stress, if less serious, were even more plain. To cast in a lump of burning pitch from the great catapult was a favourite feat of the Mortimer

marksmen, and the burnt ruins of stables, cattle-sheds and huts, with smoke-marks up the walls and pitch-smears down them, witnessed to their skill.

It was the evening of the fourteenth of August, and hot within the unsheltered walls. The Mortimers had stayed within their entrenchments so long as the heavier weapons from the castle were in use, but the ammunition for these was now exhausted, and arrowproof mantelets of withies and mud were sufficient. Behind these they sat in twos and threes, while under the shade of the west wall was a group of a score or so, cooking their evening meal, and holding up strips of smoking flesh as they jeered at their starving foe.

Within was the quiet of endurance. The armourer sat idle with his head upon his anvil, the arblaster lay beneath his engines; while for the rest, those who were not upon duty lay on the bare boards of the hall and wished for sleep, or, having attained their desire, moaned for hunger as they slept. Lambert called Wulf to go the rounds with him.

"Already?" said Wulf, "you have kept watch from midnight last, and less than two hours since you left the walls."

"I took my watch with the rest. Now I will be Castellan awhile. Follow me."

So they went together, Wulf heavily, Lambert in

angry rebellion against disaster. He had had pride in his first command, love for his red castle, and defeat was bitter; yet he spoke cheerfully to the men, leaning in their arms against the embrasures hot through with the sun.

"Ha! What is this?" he cried, as they turned the south-west angle and came in view of the turret. The man who should have been guarding it lay at his length on the stones. Lambert hurried to him, and was about to unbuckle the hawberk that pressed on his throat, when Wulf pushed him aside from this personal tendance on a man-at-arms. Wulf was far more careful of Lambert's dignity than Lambert was of his own.

"There is no blood—he burns not—'tis a mere swoon. Hi! Weremund! Wake up, man!"

Under somewhat rough ministrations, the youth came to his senses and struggled to his feet.

"Go to the hall, and send Scrob in your place," said Lambert. "He will have a meal to-morrow," he added to Wulf, when Weremund had staggered away.

"Why not to-night? Twelve hours is long to such very empty bellies."

Lambert made no reply, and they descended by a narrow staircase in the wall to a stable where, in place of the twenty good steeds which had been salted and eaten, Lambert's own Beaugris stood in

solitude, finding a melancholy pleasure in blowing the dust from corner to corner of his empty manger. He turned reproachful eyes.

"Good boy, good boy!" said Lambert, patting him, "we'll have some rides together yet, and full measures of corn after them, too!"

From the stable they crossed the courtyard. If the rations of the fighting man, on whose condition all their lives hung, had been reduced so low that he was liable to faint at his post, it may be imagined how piteous was the state of these poor churls and their families, worthless in time of war.

In the strength of the mid-day sun they had crouched in the line of shade at the wall's foot, and now that the sun was setting they still lay there. One man, a cottier of about Lambert's own age, was dying of fever, and a little child lay by him, its head upon his arm. Lambert, with stern mien, was passing the pair by, when he stopped and addressed the woman who sat on the ground near, nursing her knees and rocking.

"That child is dead!"

The woman scrambled to her feet and came towards him.

"I know it—I know it!" she whispered hoarsely, "I hoped you would not notice! Sir! Sir! Let them be! She only died this morning—he doesn't know—he thinks her sleeping, and it keeps him quiet

—in pity let them bide—it will save toil too, sire, they can both be buried together in the morning.”

“Very well, she can bide till morning, but no longer,” said Lambert. “If any interfere with you say ’twas by my order. Now, Wulf, the storehouse ! ”

As he went the woman’s voice followed him.

“The blessing of the weak be upon you in your strength, and may our Lady of Consolation be at your side when the hour comes to you that has come to my poor man here.”

The storehouse was hollowed out of the rock beneath the keep. Round the walls a broad ledge had been left to hold the vats in which flesh was laid to salt, and wine and cider to ripen ; sacks of beans and meal stood there, with cheeses and barrels of butter. Now the ledge held empty bags and vats and barrels, and the gaunt cellarer, an old retainer from Clee, sat among them.

“Well, Piers,” said Lambert kindly, “it seems by your looks you have fared no better than the rest. You know not how to use your opportunities, man ! ”

The old fellow’s lank cheeks looked dry enough to crack as he grinned at his master’s pleasantry.

“I see how it stands with us. But there is still some reserve for the sick, I suppose ? Is it in the great chest ? ”

"What is left is there, as you may see," said Piers, opening an oaken chest, deeply carved. In it were a few small cakes of bread and a skin of wine.

"Take us out a cake and a cup of wine, Wulf. For the rest, see to it, Piers, that it go to no hand but Wulf's or mine."

"I will do your bidding, if so be I live so long," said the man.

"You will do that, never fear," said Lambert. He was not always gentle of speech with his vassals, but the old cellarer touched some spring of tenderness in him, that his duty to the earl had left undiscovered.

Having finished his melancholy round, he led the way to his own chamber, in the north-west turret.

"What now?" asked Wulf from behind as they entered.

Lambert looked through one of the loopholes at the river, sunset red, at the ford and the bending willows.

"I have something to say to you. To-morrow we surrender."

"So you say. Why not to-night, say I."

"Not to-night, for besides the usual objection to surrender at nightfall (the Mortimers would not receive it) I have a task to perform before the morning. Give me the bread. I shall want as much

strength as I can get. To-morrow I hope we shall all be fed."

"As many of us as can open jaws to eat."

"By God's Head, you are cheering company! Take this crust, and drink to hearten you, for I must put you in command awhile. At dark I leave the castle by the secret passage."

Wulf uttered a sound of sullen astonishment.

"Yes, listen to me." Lambert understood the growl and its meaning.

"I have work across the river. At dark I creep out, but with God's aid I return at dawn. If by sunrise I am not yet with you, you must make the best terms you can."

Wulf did not speak. Lambert munched his bread and drank, observing him.

"Can you swim?" he asked presently, passing the cup.

"No."

"Can any in the castle, except myself?"

"None, so far as I know."

"Look out—not that loophole, the next—you can see the ford, can you not?"

"Aye."

"And what besides?"

"The earthworks, full of damned Mortimers."

"Commanding the ford?"

"You know it."

"Aye, and you also know it. Yet you thought that if one could save himself by water, twenty could; and you thought Lambert de Fort-Castel a coward and traitor."

Wulf hung his head.

"Pardon me, my lord. Lambert——"

"Get to your feet. I have enough to think of without such as this. Be content; I see it was not Wulf called me traitor, but the hunger-pain under his belt. Yet let it not happen again, for I have more need of you now than ever before, which is saying much. Either we two trust one another as a knight trusts his steel, or we had better part here and now and for ever. If to-night strain your fidelity, to-morrow may break it."

"You reproach me that I do not trust you," said Wulf; "it is certain at least that you trust not me. To-night you run a narrow risk between water and arrow-point to cross the river; in the morning, at the same cost, you will return—only to perform some equally strange feat to-morrow. I would you treated me as brother or as man-at-arms, one or the other."

"That is but reason, and I will tell you more, though not quite all. I have an errand to do in Clee. It should have been done long since, but I have let it bide, hoping for the king or some other good chance to release us. It is treasure—hid treasure,

that none can find but myself, and to-night is the very last hour it can be carried off."

"So this journey of yours must be? Methinks you will lose your life."

"Whether or not, I must go. My honour leans on it, and an oath, beside the rich treasure. If I succeed I shall return. I may fail, and yet return, but if I return not, you may know I am dead or a prisoner, and in that case make the best terms you can. Do you understand me?"

"Yes. But what said you of to-morrow?"

"I said that if your faithfulness were a thin web to-morrow might tear it. Whatever betide the castle I must escape to the king, for in that lies our only hope. If you or any other like to think that I fly for fear of what the Mortimers may do to this body of mine—think it, an you can! Now I will sleep. Come to me at dark and bring that light mail with you."

At nightfall Wulf returned as he was bidden: Lambert took the mail from him, and balanced it in his hands, ponderingly.

"It is the lightest in the armoury," said Wulf.

"Yes—yet I doubt. Had it been a month since—but as it is——" He ran his hand down his lean arm and leg.

"You cannot go unarmed! The road to Clee is broidered with Mortimer's watch-fires!"

"The main thing is to get across the river undrowned. If I am at the bottom it will matter little to me how many or how few are the Mortimers, or that my mail is good. I must consider too that I have to return by the same road, and I hope with a burden to bear. No, this jerkin must suffice, with the double leather head-piece. See if there be any stirring between this and the storehouse, and if not we will be going. If any asks for me, say I am asleep."

The secret passage of Gubenhale was known to five men only ; Lambert himself, Wulf, Piers the cellarer, and Piers' two sons. In building the castle a large excavation had been made, the stone from which had been used on the walls. This was now closed, but if any had been bold enough to investigate, they would have found it entirely filled with earth and blocks of sandstone, the débris from the passage, over the completion of which many a night had been spent since the siege began.

It was no more than a burrow, narrow and low, admitting but one man at a time ; and for this there were two good reasons. One was that in the event of its being discovered by an enemy, it would be of little use to him except by aid of treachery, and the other that the making of even so small an outlet had been a heavy task for four men all with other duties to perform ; it had only been by halving their

hours of sleep that they had finished the task undetected. The upper part had been comparatively easy, for the stone was firm, though soft ; but the digging of the lower, where the obstacle consisted first of sand, then of alluvial earth, was extremely toilsome, since the earth must all be carried back in baskets to the cellar, and branches had to be used to support the sides which would otherwise have collapsed in rainy weather.

The exit was upon the river-bank, about thirty yards below the ford, where a row of willows grew, great unpolled trees with roots overhanging the bank, which, being of soft soil and boulders, washed away in flood-season, leaving the roots hanging to the water, like cages full of big red stones.

At nightfall then (and luckily the night fell dark, with clouds over a rising moon past her full) the two men came to the store-room.

Lambert, in his leather suit and cap, with shoes of thin leather buckled beneath his gaiters, looked ready as the long knife he carried in place of sword. It was hard to leave his sword, but it is enough to swim Severn in leather.

Wulf emptied of its contents the ponderous chest already mentioned, which stood upon the ledge of living rock. This done, he pulled out one of the knobs of the carving, which proved to be the head of a long staple. A similar one from the other side

having also been removed, the bottom of the chest turned on a hinge, and a damp earthy smell rose from the black opening thus revealed.

Having slung the lantern round his neck, Lambert climbed into the chest, and let himself down, feeling for foothold. As soon as he had disappeared, Wulf followed, creeping down the passage in his lord's shadow.

After some ten minutes of crawling, they arrived at the point where the passage widened and came to an end ; in front of them, blocking the way, was a mass of loose stones, and in the centre of the mass a large rectangular block, propped by the rough-hewn trunks of young oak-trees.

The lower end of each prop was jammed against the side of the passage, one on the right hand, one on the left, and the upper ends, which met against the upper part of the block of stone, were fastened to one another by an oaken pin and cord, so that to force entrance from without would have been as hard a task as to batter in the castle door. The cord and pins removed, the stone still stood of its own weight, but the two men pulled it inwards and rested it upon the crossed props. The sweet night air poured in.

"This is a mad thing !" burst through Wulf's sullen mutterings. The watch-fires of the enemy were plain to be seen outlining the road up the hills beyond the river, the only path for Clee.

Lambert smiled.

"Yes," he said, "mad enough. Pray to the patron saint of madmen, whoever he may be, and tell none that I have lost my wits. Leave the passage open and be by it at dawn. When you hear a sound within, let down the lantern."

With no more delay, and no word but the "Farewell, brother!" and "Farewell, brother!" that comrades exchange before a battle, Lambert crawled out between the willow-roots to the water's edge, Wulf peering after him.

There was a sound no greater than a water-rat makes when he dives from a floating snag, and Wulf, with a groan of foreboding, turned and made his way back to the hunger-struck castle.

CHAPTER XVIII

MATINS

IT was the hour of matins, the midnight hour. All who served our Lady of Petitions in the Holy House of Clee were assembled in the chapel : all, that is, but Lady Emma the Abbess, and those who attended upon her.

There stood the nuns, each in her appointed stall ; there the novices at their bench, with Sister Constance at their head ; opposite her the prioress watched to see that all was done in its accustomed order. At one side of the choir, behind the novices, Sister Winnebride was at the organ.

The nave was in twilight, and the chancel itself was dim ; for the candles by which it was illuminated, not being of wax as were the white ones reserved for mass, but of common home-boiled grease, had become soft in the summer heat, burned badly, guttering and leaving long wicks, which sent up thin malodorous columns of smoke.

The novice whose duty it was to go round snuffing these candles at intervals during the Office, found

that they quite outran her, and not being at the best of times a zealous snuffer, she lost heart and gave up the attempt to keep pace with them.

Through the slight but unpleasant fog thus occasioned, the nuns and novices, new from their beds, looked foggy and frowsy, and even Our Lady, above the altar, seemed in the flickering shadows to nod and drowse, looking down from her chair at her Son, nailed and crowned below. Saint Lambert, Patron of the Fort-Castels, peering out of his dark chapel, the mitre in his hand, the sword he loved and renounced lying across his feet, and the spear with which he was slain in his hand instead, seemed to glare impatiently on all the lazy crew. The recumbent figures of Lord Reginald, brother to Earl John, and of the late Abbess, carved on their tombs, alone seemed at ease, as having a right to sleep as much as they would.

Dimly through the dimness came the music, as though sound as well as sight were somewhat befogged, and very flat was the intoning of the sleepy voices. Jehane, contrary to her wont, sang as flat as any.

Yet it was, as matins went, quite a lively Office. First occurred an incident, not unusual, but always amusing :—Sister Magdalene snored aloud and was sternly waked by the sub-cantor, at which the youngest novice giggled, then caught the prioress'

eye, and not yet being accustomed to the disciplining of her tender soul, sobbed and was sent away in disgrace by Sister Constance.

Later, a swallow, which had been sleeping among the rafters, suddenly realized that it was light and that she was imprisoned, and perhaps in fear of suffocation by candle-reek, flew wildly along and athwart the roof ; then, taking the only glass window for a way of escape, dashed against it, and fell dead, a victim of panic.

At the sickening sound of the thud of the small body and its fluttering fall, more than one shuddered. But Jehane took no notice.

Surgeons, nurses, officers of the Inquisition, all who have to deal with pain, know well that there comes a time when pain's power fails and the tortured one escapes ; the escape may be but temporary, as of mouse from triumphant cat, yet none the less there is that hour when the victim, having borne as much as flesh can bear, faints—escapes ; and agony must wait for him awhile.

As with agony of the body so with other agonies ; Jehane's heart had been tortured, had borne all it could, and the limit was past. It had fainted, escaped, and felt nothing. .

All the days since the apple-gathering she had been so ; she had slept, waked, obeyed all commands of bell and word ; had smiled, and worked, and now

stood among the rest singing the *Venite Exultemus*. Her mind was fully awake to what would happen after Terce, but over her heart was a merciful insensibility ; it was dead within her, a heart in a swoon.

Most of the nuns were praying for her. None understood to pray that the swoon might last just nine hours more.

Breaking in upon the lazy drone, sudden, loud, startling as the crack of thunder on a summer's morn, came a knock on the chapel door. Not the little door from the chancel by which the nuns entered from the cloister, nor the Abbess' private entrance behind the choir, but the strong north door leading to the world, studded with nails, rarely opened.

Now in the dark midnight some one was knocking, and between the knocks a voice was heard, crying " Open ! "

Who could it be but the fierce enemy, the Mortimer, who, tired of sparing the house of Mary, was here with fire and sword, rape and torment. They thought of the glorious Sisterhood who had mutilated their faces that they might be abhorrent in the eyes of the wicked men into whose hands they were about to fall, and felt their noses, still in place. Sister Winnebride's hands tumbled from the keys of the organ : the novice who was blowing for her loosed the bellows ; the portress looked towards the prioress

for orders, the keys at her waist jingling witness to her terror ; but the only reply to the supplication in her eyes was an imperative sign to open the grating and inquire the business of this knocker at the gate. Having long ago forgotten how to disobey, she went down the aisle, her sandals sounding plain in the silence—flip-a, flop-a, flip-a, flop-a.

Before she reached the door the knocking was renewed, and a voice, loud enough to be heard at the very altar, cried—

“In the name of the Saviour, admit a dying man !”

Signing to the Firmaress, and to a sister of humble standing, to take candles and follow, the prioress walked with dignity down the chancel steps. She was half-way down the nave, and the portress was in the act of sliding back the panel that covered the small barred grating, when the voice cried again, now desperately and imperiously—

“Open, I bid you ! I would speak with the Abbess !”

“Who are you ?”

“Her kinsman, Lambert de Fort-Castel—slain by the Mortimers. To save my soul, haste ! In the name of God, and of our Pitiful Lady, haste !”

The prioress hesitated. The Lady Abbess lay on her death-bed, and the Abbess' good word at the

last would influence greatly the election of her successor. To unlock the door, with a strong and treacherous enemy in possession of the country round, was a terrible risk. Yet if the suppliant proved in truth to be Lord Lambert—the Abbess was known to be even more devoted to her noble house than to her convent, and if it came to her ears that the young Lord her nephew had beaten on her gates in vain in his extremity. The prioress did not lack courage.

“Open the door!” she said, and herself stood nearest to it, at the same time signing to Sister Constance to lead away the novices. Sister Constance said afterwards that she mistook the sign, and thought that the Holy Mother only wished that the chanting should be resumed; so the girls remained in their places, intermittent groans sounded from the organ, and a curiously irregular pointing added mystery to the antiphons.

“Sister Agneta, open the door!”

The portress slid back the bolts, the Firmaress helping her to lift the oaken bar that went across from jamb to jamb. Through the grating the voice was heard again, now faintly.

“Haste! For the Crucified Lord’s sake, haste!”

At last the key was turned, and the portress, cautiously and inch by inch, began to open the heavy portal. But the space was not more than two inches

wide when the door swung out sharply towards her, so sharply that had she not clung to the key she would have measured her length. The nun with the candles received a jog that sent a shower of hot grease over her hands; and the prioress stepped back in haste as a tall man fell through the doorway. For all the Holy Mother's nimble retreat, his head came in contact with her shins before it reached the stone.

With creditable self-possession she stepped over him, pushed his feet out of the way of the door, and quickly closed and locked it. Not till then did she look at him.

He lay still, his face was pale, and the fingers of the hand he pressed to his side were streaked with blood.

The prioress leaned down to see the better, the Firmaress knelt, while the humble sister with the candles dropped tears and grease upon his feet.

When Jehane, in her place among the rest, heard the knocking and the voice that cried for aid, a strange sensation came over her, a throbbing in every member, and especially in that heart which had seemed so dead, so freed from any pain of feeling. A throbbing at first slow, then faster and faster, more and more painful. Yet she hardly knew it to be her own flesh and blood that so distressed her;

rather it seemed the whole air that was beating, clanging that pitiful appeal into her ears.

Her seat was upon the south side of the choir, so that the north door was full in her view, and the picture beside it, the group of black-clad figures, the candles shedding a dim corona about the prostrate form among them, shone as in the circle of a lantern-slide. There seemed no other thing clear or real in all the world but that little circle. A murmur of voices came from it, and once a moan. Awakened by the knocking, somewhere outside a shrill cock crew.

"Where is your hurt?" asked the prioress, as the prostrate man opened his eyes on the faces round him.

"'Tis inward—my death-blow—ah! touch me not! you hasten—I would confess.—A priest!"

Now a priest was a thing hard to come by for the moment, since Father Giles was fast with his lord in Clee Castle, and failing him there was not a ghostly father nearer than the monastery of the Holy Spirit, full three miles off. Even for the saving of a soul there was not a nun bold enough to traverse the woods in the mirk midnight to fetch him.

"The priest will be here anon," said the prioress. "Until he comes to ease your soul, let us care for your body. Sister Agneta, fetch wine, and help, that he may be carried to the infirmary."

"Nay, good Mother in God," said Lambert, rousing himself, "that may not be. If you move me it will be my instant death. Since no priest is here, I beg you give me speech with a damsel in your keeping, a novice of this holy sisterhood—her name Jehane—I have a word for her ear—I must confess——"

"That is impossible," replied the prioress, hard-lipped. "Tell your griefs to me if you will, but for the novice you speak of, she even now prepares for her vows, she is already the child of heaven, and never by my consent shall she be dragged back to earth to hear the woes of sinners. Were you her own father you should not speak with her now."

"Nay then! Nay then! I will not lose my immortal soul for your scruples! Jehane!"

His voice rang to the rafters like a battle-cry.

"Jehane!"

There was a flutter among the novices, as far beyond Sister Constance's control as the stir of a summer thicket when the wind is in the branches; then, parting them, as a startled bird parts the fluttering leaves, Jehane flew from her place and down the aisle, and crouched by Lambert's side, her face close to his.

The prioress opened her lips to order Sister Agneta to seize this offender and put her in safe keeping until she should choose her punishment, but before the

word escaped her she had concluded to let matters take their course. This man was undoubtedly the son of Earl John, their liege lord, the Abbess' near kinsman ; and therefore, as the world judges, of more value than many novices.

Jehane leaned close to the pale face, murmuring—

“ Sir Lambert ! Oh, Sir Lambert ! ” She could not, though she tried, find one other word to say. He smiled at her, then raised himself a little, and spoke with the voice of command.

“ Lady Prioress and good sisters, I pray you stand away from us a space.”

They drew back instinctively, the prioress assuming the expression of one who says in her heart, “ Let the cup of iniquity be filled, the judgment is in the Lord's hands.”

“ Jehane,” whispered Lambert, and his voice, though low, was neither faint nor broken, “ do not move, look at me still as you are looking now. Do not speak or show surprise at what I say. Listen ! I have come to fetch you. I am not dying. I am not even hurt.”

“ But you bleed,” she whispered back.

“ Thorns. Listen ! I have come as I promised. Are you happy here ? Content to take the vows ? ”

“ No !—No, no ! ”

“ You are not yet vowed ? ”

“ No. After Terce to-day.”

"Shall I take you hence?"

Jehane hesitated, a hand to her heart.

"You cannot trust me? Is that it?"

"No. But you know—Ursula!"

"I will arrange that. All shall be well, if only you trust me."

"I trust you as I trust Our Lady!"

"That is well. Now obey me. Give me wine."

The goblet which the Firmaress had previously put to his lips still stood on the floor near them.

"Now raise my head on your arm. Gently—remember how sore wounded I am! Now the cup to my lips—so!"

He drank, then spoke aloud as though revived by the draught.

"Aid me to my feet, good damsel," he said, groaning, and leaning hard on Jehane's shoulder.

"Holy Mother," he said, swaying, "I should ill requite your goodness and the mercy of this Holy Sisterhood, if my presence were to bring fire and sword upon your peaceful walls, and the vengeance of the Mortimers. My soul is now at rest, and for my body let them do what they will. Thanks to your tender ministrations, I have at least strength to get me outside to die! Damsel! Aid me!"

He gave no time for reply, but pushing Jehane before him, staggered quickly to the door, with one movement turned the key, whipped it from its place,

and they were outside together, the door locked on the astonished sisterhood.

Outside. Out of the reek of candles and stale incense and woollen gowns, out of the sound of drowsy chanting, out in the dark and the wind and the free-growing world.

"Have a care ! Not so fast !" cried Lambert at her heels.

Like a deer with the hounds on her traces, like a heron from the hawk's beak, so Jehane was flying.

At Lambert's voice she stopped, panting and glancing back, as though she still feared to see the light from the chapel windows.

"Nay, child, we are running ourselves breathless to no end ! Our dangers lie not behind but in front of us. This is not our road !"

He drew her hastily under the trees, for they had come to a broad, deep-rutted track, and dark as was the night they were upon high land, and their figures might have been visible to a watcher below, either against the sky or the yellow dust, worn with the hoofs of warlike riders.

"Where are we going ? To Gubenhale ?"

"Not by this road, 'tis guarded," whispered Lambert ; "know you no other track to the river ?"

"I think not. Which way did you come if not by this ?"

"By no desirable one, else had I been with you before. It led through bogs and thorns and Mortimers' arrows; we must find some better way. Is there no path further south? South of Lax would do best."

"There is no path through the wood at this time of the year, except the bed of the brook;—but let me think—if we keep straight for the south from here we shall strike the Ribeford meadows. Is that too far down-stream?"

"That will do well. Lead on. Make no noise."

Happily the woods they had to traverse were not thick with under-brush like those round the Woodward's dwelling, but open, formed of large stately trees, while beneath their branches, though it was very dark, the pitfalls awaiting the feet of the fugitives were no worse than rabbit-burrows and tangled bushes of honeysuckle.

Jehane knew the wood well. Under guard of Sister Monica, she and her schoolfellows had played there many a sunny hour. Even in the dark she knew her bearings, and dark or light, she could always feel the south.

Presently they came to the wattled fence of the manor domain. Lambert strode it, lifted Jehane, and they were in the meadows. While they had been making their way through the woods the sky had been growing lighter, the dewy grass gleamed,

and here and there the long white horns of the resting oxen stood up like twin crescents. Over the soft pasture it was easy going, and they slipped a mile downhill in very short space. The wind blew Jehane's hair forward over her shoulders. Presently they came to another fence, parallel with the river, dividing the upper pastures from the low leas, or hay meadows, so fertile, yet so liable to pay toll to floods.

Still the sky grew lighter ; for the wind, which all night through had been blowing steadily from westward, sending before it clouds that passed and re-passed in dim procession, was driving now the last of the gentle flock. Softly and steadily, silver-edged, it went its way across the heavens, leaving the moon large and clear-shining in a space of light-paled grey.

All the way so far they had been in the twilight of the wood ; now they had a clear view eastward.

The river below them swung silver, the towers of Gubenhale were silhouetted, distinct to every stone, against the sky. The watch-fires at its feet were clear sparks—even the men about them were visible.

"Saints aid us !" muttered Lambert desperately.

CHAPTER XIX

CROSSING SEVERN

“**W**E can do nothing. Sit down, we will wait where these bushes will hide us.”

The place Lambert had chosen for a halt was a bushy patch, no doubt concealing a spring, for an elder hung its unripe berries over some moss-grown stones, and the grass was trodden thin, as though in the hot forenoons cattle had sought the place for coolness. The air was clear, grey, and cold with the chill before dawn.

Jehane did as she was bidden, without noticing Lambert's manner, hardly hearing his words. For the westerly wind as it came down the hill-side by the way they themselves had come, bore to her ears a sound at which she started and trembled ;—a sweet and gentle sound, the tree-tangled, wind-broken melody of the convent bell.

“ Ah ! Why are they ringing it ? Why are they ringing it now ? ” she cried in a whisper of terror.

“ To guide home the wandering lamb, perchance. Do you not repent, truant that you are ? ”

But Jehane was as deaf to his raillery as she had been to his agitation, and hearing through the bell the rush of river and wind, and the twitter of scarce-roused birds, she laughed, a high, hysteric laugh.

"You must not do that!" Lambert reproved her sharply, "that would carry across the river!"

"I—I could not help it—it is so wonderful—think of the prioress' face when you locked the door! And Sister Constance—and oh! Sister Magdalene, the dear! Will it keep her awake, I wonder. How very, very wicked they must think me!"

She stifled another laugh, stifled a still more urgent sob, and then, with a deep-caught breath, rolled over in a swoon, the short sudden swoon of suppressed emotion. It lasted but a few seconds.

"God's Feet! What made you do that?" cried Lambert in an extreme of perplexity and discomposure, as she opened her eyes and sat up, as surprised as he.

"I don't know, I'm sure. I will not do it again. It was so strange—being alive—and you being alive—and the woods and the river! Is it true you are not even wounded?"

"This is my worst hurt," he said, showing the deep red of a bramble-scratch across his wrist. "Did I act my part well?"

"You acted it very well—too well. You frightened me very much. Your father confessor should

give you severe penance for such deceit. How did you learn it ? ”

“ I do not know. I have seen men die,” he said simply. “ I had to do my best to deceive the prioress. What an eye that woman had ! ” Then seeing she still looked at him uncertainly, he drew himself up, showed her his unpierced doublet, and ran his hands down his lean sides.

“ Now do you believe ? ” he asked, smiling.

“ Yes. I will try and forget—the north door ! ” she said with a little shudder. “ Tell me, where are we going, and what are we waiting for ? ” She pushed back her hair, quite herself again. “ And what is the matter with you ? I cannot see very plainly in this light, but if you were not Sir Lambert de Fort-Castel of Gubenhale, I should say you were afraid.”

“ What if I were ? ” said he. “ I shall never have more reason ! ”

“ What reason ? ”

“ You learned well to pray at the sound of that bell, did you not ? Then pray now to Saint Mary the Mother of God, and to the holy ones great and small, to send a cloud over the moon, else I see not how we are to save our lives.”

“ May I understand why I pray ? What is it we have to fear, cloud or none ? ”

“ Do you not see that if the sky keeps clear as it is

now, the dawn will come before the moonlight is off the river."

"Yes. Are we going over the river?"

"It runs between us and Gubenhale."

"Can we cross Lax afoot? Or have you a boat?"

Lambert, touched by her trust in him, tried to shake off his gloom.

"I ought to have fetched you before, for I knew what a risk it was that this would happen with the moon setting so late, but I hoped all the while that relief would come, and then we should have run no risk at all. As it is—in Saint Mary's you had at least food and safety! And what am I taking you to? War, famine, danger I hardly dare think of!"

"What you have taken me from was much worse than death," she said gravely. "War, famine, and danger? What are they to being buried alive fifty years before you can die! Danger!" She laughed on the word, happily.

"What perils you went through to fetch me! But I forgot, it was to redeem your word and keep your honour bright—and I called you a coward and an oath breaker! But how did you come? They said you were fast beleaguered."

"They said the truth. But you see me here for all that. As for the way—straight before you is a willow with its roots hanging down to the water. I

came through those roots last night like a rat, for that is the entrance of a passage to the castle, and that is the only way we can return. Now do you understand why we need a cloud ? ”

“ I am a foolish maid, my lord, and have been so long forbidden to use what secular wits I have that they are as rusty as a Welshman’s plough. I do not understand at all. I should have thought it easier to cross in the moonlight.”

“ I forgot you had not had much chance to learn of these things. Do you see those fires in a circle round my castle walls ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ About each of those fires stand armed Mortimers, watching to see that none escapes from the castle, or comes near to bring food, arms, or aid.”

“ Have they been there all summer ? ”

“ Since May.”

“ Horrible ! How have you borne it ? ”

“ There is one light nearer to us and lower on the river bank than are the rest. See you ? ”

“ I see. Near by is a dark thing that moves, and something that flashes, now white, now red.”

“ The dark thing that moves is the guard watching the ford. Some of the others may be drunken, or asleep, but he is awake and ready—I know him. That which flashes is his helmet, catching now the moon and now the firelight. If we crossed the ford

at Lax we should land in his arms. Even so far downstream as we are now a rat could hardly cross in this light and he not see it. He can send a bolt through a wristlet twice out of three times, so you may guess how it would fare with our heads."

"Ah! Now I quite understand the need for prayer; but you must pray as well, for the Holy Ones are very likely displeased with me. Kneel by me, and I will do my best."

So they knelt side by side in the dew, Jehane with bent head and hands crossed on her breast, Lambert holding up the crossed hilt of his knife.

"Dear Lady Mary, merciful, mighty in heaven," she began in the convent intoning, "who hearkeneth to the petitions that ever come before thee, I pray thee to cover the moon which is the symbol of thy perpetual chastity, cover it with a fair thick cloud that we may have a little dark before the sun-rising.

"And thou, sweet Saint Julian, who upholdest all poor ferrymen from the power of running water, make us light in the stream, and the river soft and gentle to us, that we may in safety win the further bank, and give a thanksgiving to thee there.

"And, noble Saint Mary and high Saint Julian, if you are minded to refuse this boon to one who has just deserted the life of prayer for an earthly one, grant this little thing for the sake of the noble

lord who prays with me, lest in trying to save my life he lose his own, which is of so much more worth."

"There! That is the best I can think of! Now tell me what I shall have to do, that I may be ready when the cloud comes."

"First we must swim over the river."

"Swim over! But I cannot swim!"

"I will tell you how to hold by my coat. Put your hands on my shoulders and let yourself lie on the water. If you struggle or fear we shall both be drowned. If I had not known you to be the bravest maid in the realm I had never dared this venture; and if I am mistaken and your heart not so high as I believe, we had better ask absolution for our sins, for we shall surely die soon, one way or another!"

"I know not what may betide when I am in the water, but I am not afraid yet," said Jehane, "so tell me more. When we are over the river, what then?"

"We creep up the secret passage into the castle."

"And when we are in the castle, what next?"

"The priest will wed us."

"Wed——us?"

"Jehane's astonishment was without affectation. Ever since she had heard Lambert's voice calling outside the chapel door her thoughts had been fully

occupied with passing events. She had not had a moment to consider what was going to be the end of this adventure. She had had but two thoughts, beyond the exigencies of escape.—She was out of the convent, and Lambert had kept his word.

"What but that, my child?" said he. "You know how the saying runs, there are but three places for a maid—her father's roof, her husband's arms, or the veil."

"Yes, I know the proverb, but the maker of it forgot one thing—if I loose your coat as you swim, what then?"

"Death of self-will means death hereafter. They have taught you that! Poor maid, would you choose death rather than mate with me? You have still a choice. You preferred the veil to staying at home to your sister's hurt, so say to me now, will you return to the cloister rather than have my arm for your shield? Speak one word only, and I will take you back to the Holy House."

Jehane did not at once reply, but turned her head, plucking at the grass.

"That would bring you into great peril, my lord," she said shyly. "It would be daylight before your return."

"Leave me to guard my own life," he said, "tell me your will."

"My lord," she said softly, "it would not be meet,

would it, for one of your noble house to wed the daughter of your father's vassal ? ”

“ Not meet ? ’Twould be the very meetest ! It is what my mother ever prayed for. She longed with her last thoughts that England should be a nation of one heart and one tongue, the greatest of all peoples, and that I should help it forward ! That was in her heart when she had Wulf, son of a churl, brought up with me like a brother born. If she were living, Jehane, she would welcome you as a beloved daughter. Even my father will do that, fear not.”

“ For the sake of England and your mother, then, you will stoop to wed a vassal.”

“ Child, be not so foolish ! I have seen many women. The Normans were tall and stately, the French dark-eyed and willing. I have desired some of them, and the lands of some, but I swear to you I have never wished to wed until I saw you in the forest. Lord ! Vassal ! I would wed you, little Jehane, because I love you, and if you will not I shall go mourning all my days. Now what do you say ? Do you love me ? ”

“ I do not know much of love, my lord,” replied Jehane, timid before his stern fire, “ and what I have seen I do not hold in great admiration, but—I think I should like well to be your wife. And ’tis the best of the three ways as things stand with me,” she added

thoughtfully, at which Lambert smiled, and after that they were silent.

A cold wooer he seemed, but Jehane was satisfied, looking at him ever and anon from under swiftly raised eyelashes. The dawn showed him gaunt and weary, with a touch of fierceness in his pressed lips, and eyes that looked at river and sky instead of her. The wet leather clung to his body and limbs, the wet cap to his head ; he was torn with briars and stained with mud, and his face was scratched and whipped rough with the twigs. Yet no one could have taken him for any but a man of noble birth, nor Jehane for any but a pure and beautiful maid, though truly a quaint lady-love for a baron to woo. Her soaked sandals, and bare ankles scored across with thorns, showed from under her narrow grey frock ; her head was bare, for she had neither mantle nor hood, and as she sat she plaited her hair in two long plaits, dividing it not without difficulty, for it had been entangled by the wind and branches. The ends she knotted with strands from her torn gown ; then as Lambert still watched river and sky, she gathered a bine of honeysuckle and twined it round her head in a coronet, as she and the other girls had done when, out of sight of Sister Monica, they played at weddings.

It was lightening for dawn ; the air that rose from the river was cold, the dew-soaked grass cold.

"Tell me, if it please you, Sir Lambert," she ventured, "what shall happen next, after we are wedded?"

"Surrender; that is the next verse of the hymn," he answered bitterly, "and after that, if God is good and my strength holds, we may escape alive."

"But if the castle is bound to fall whether you are there or no, why must we go back through all these dangers?—I know naught of such matters," she added hastily, seeing Lambert's quick frown.

"You will learn. I think better of you than to keep you from knowledge of peril and matters concerning knighthood. You shall be brother-in-arms as well as wife. I return for my men's sake, since if the Mortimers found me gone they would be so enraged they would leave not a man alive, and my name would be dishonoured wherever knighthood is known. You must return with me because now I have you safely in my hands I will not lose sight of you again. Am I ungentle? Ah, Jehane, when I lay last night in the fern-brake, and the Mortimer's horse strode over me, one of the riders looked back (taking me for boar perhaps) and drew his bolt. I saw the gleam of his eye behind it, and my bitterest thought was that I should see you no more. I do not return to Gubenhale for pleasure—I have had enough of life-risking, aye, and enough of toil too

for one while ; yet must I go, and take you, into a worse peril than any. I cannot talk of love now, Jehane, for it needs all my wits (and God mend them !) to think how to save my men. It is no light thing to be a baron's wife in days like these," he added with a smile.

"I do not know as to that, but I understand that to be brother-in-arms to a lord marcher is not a dull office. Will you tell me now, Sir Castellan, what we have to do when the castle is surrendered, and we have escaped alive, as God will."

"I must find the king, and tell him how much of his realm these Mortimers take for themselves, and how they treat his loyal lords : how, not content with a round dozen of castles, they must needs seize Bridgnorth, Carrechova, and now Gubenhale and I fear me Clee : how, instead of keeping their oath to use their arms only against the king's enemies the Welsh, they leave the border unprotected while they take arms against those more loyal than themselves. He is not the king I take him for if he does not come back hotfoot. For you, I must think how I can safest dispose of you till my return."

After that they sat in silence, Lambert half asleep with extreme weariness. Presently Jehane touched him.

"Look," she said, with awestruck voice, "I think the Virgin is answering our prayer."

"I see no cloud," he answered, glancing sharply upward.

"No, but watch the river. It is like a bowl of warm water on a winter's day. See the little white curls! They rise up and the wind takes them slantwise, hither and thither. It is the mist that comes with sunrise when the day is going to be fine. It will soon be a yard thick over the water. See how like angels they are, fair thin water-angels, with their heads upraised and their white robes floating. There is hardly a breath of wind, yet they fly along swiftly to do the dear Virgin's will; 'tis as if they feared to be too late to save us."

"Thanks be unto her name," said Lambert, "come down now to the water, and remember what I told you."

Protected from man's violence by the gentle mist, they committed their souls to God and Saint Julian and their bodies to the river.

The swim was no easy one for a man weary, hungry and cold, and in his clothes beside. More than once his head went under and he swallowed water; but he struggled on stroke after stroke, more and more heavily, his breast feeling ready to burst, his heart thumping in his ears. He tried to keep his head upstream, but he knew that they were drifting down towards the rapids at Blakiston as his resist-

ance to the dragging current weakened. Perhaps their lives would have ended in the deep hole under the rock, and their bodies, caught in the undertow, would have turned there till flood-season, had it not been for the voice in his ear, a voice that shook not a little, but spoke bravely.

"A little further—a very little—we are close to the bank—I can see the grass now—a very little further!"

At last he felt his knees upon the bottom, caught to the roots and pulled himself up. Jehane climbed out lightly, but Lambert lay awhile gasping, holding to the willows, his feet in the water and his cheek on the mud, three hundred yards further downstream than the point he had aimed for; but still across, alive, and unseen by the enemy.

CHAPTER XX

SIEGE

FOR two hours past Wulf had not left his post in the storeroom. Faithful as a bull-dog, and not at all unlike one, he waited for his lord's return. Sometimes he went to the open chest, and leaned his ear towards it, lest some slight sound from within should have escaped him ; sometimes he mounted the steps leading to the courtyard, and looked anxiously at the dawn, waxing stronger ; but for the most part he sat upon the stone ledge, his arms folded tight over the hunger-pain, and his eyes, red and swelled with watching, fixed on the lantern at his feet, which cast grotesque shadows on his heavy face.

Suddenly he started with head aside. There was a low call, coming from the very rock. He caught up the lantern and lowered it through the chest.

"All well ? " he called.

"All well," came a faint reply, and Wulf, stooping, helped Lambert up, with oaths of fervent thanksgiving for his escape, and reproaches for his plight. When, however, Lambert assisted Jehane through

the opening, Wulf stared at her as fixedly as though his senses were forsaking him.

"What ails you?" cried Lambert impatiently. "Wake up and gather your wits! this is Jehane of the Woodwards, and my betrothed. Did I not tell you I went in search of treasure—well, here it is. Come, get us some arms and dry clothing—yes, and a bowl of water; and tell Father Theodor to be ready to wed us. God's life! Wake up, man!"

Wulf with difficulty took his eyes from Jehane's face.

"There is no women's gear—unless the women in the courtyard——"

"Pah! Find something clean," said Lambert, "it matters not what so 'tis dry and will cover her; and bring me my mail and sword. Waste not a moment! Or must I go myself?"

Roused at last, Wulf went, like a man walking from a drugged sleep.

"I have never seen him so before," said Lambert. "It will be a sorry thing for all of us if his wits are going adrift now; but we must bear with him. He would give his life for me, and perchance I shall soon require it."

"I have heard of him from my father," began Jehane, but said no more, for Lambert was pacing to and fro, deep in gloomy thought.

"If I but knew how to save the men," he muttered ;
"they have been faithful, and I love not to think
of them hanging from the turrets or rotting in the
Mortimers' dungeons."

"Why cannot they go out by the passage?"

"Because——" He was about to give somewhat
the same answer as he had given to Wulf, but he
interrupted himself, stopping his pacing suddenly.

"What a dullard I have been!" he exclaimed ;
then laughed. "And now I am taught my trade
by a little maid straight from her prayers!"

"Can they? Will it do?"

"It is the only plan. Where were my wits
not to see that, though there was no escape this
side of the river so long as the Mortimers were
without and on the watch, yet when they are
within, and have once scoured the country, they
will be satisfied, and slacken. The men will only
have to wait till dark and they can get away with
less risk than ourselves. Why, child, you must
have been born for a fighter's wife! Yes—yes,
I see."

Jehane blushed with pleasure.

Wulf now returned with a clattering load which
he cast down at their feet. Lambert, examining
what he had brought, frowned.

"There is nothing here befitting a maid!"

"Fitting! I know not as to fitting! But

'tis arrow-proof at long range, and will come to her heels ! ”

He picked out a garment, and held it up by the neck.

“ What fool’s work is this ? ” cried Lambert.
“ This is Long Roger’s ! ”

“ Roger will not feel the miss of it.”

Lambert looked at him with query of raised brows. Wulf nodded.

“ What are men without a leader ? ” he said hoarsely, but with feverish rapidity, fastening Lambert’s armour as he spoke, and disregarding signals that he need not tell his story in full. “ You were—where I knew not ; I, bound to watch for you. The fools must needs be taken in by Mortimers lowing like cattle in the withe-beds—Roger, Thorald, Weremund—there was none to forbid them, poor knaves ! They have paid ! Thorald may live if he gets food soon enough—Weremund is going. What are men without a leader ? Sheep ! Goats ! You were—where, you alone can say ! I, bound to watch for you. You have paid for your bride, or rather they have. The priest shrives Weremund now, he got his deathblow bringing Roger’s body in—would not leave it lest——”

“ Fiends take your tongue ! This is beyond bearing ! ” flashed Lambert.

"May I have that coat, please, Wulf," interposed Jehane, who had been washing her face; "he was a brave man, I warrant, and true to his Lord, this poor Roger?"

"As any man born."

She put the garment over her head as a woman puts on a petticoat, and felt for the thongs.

'See, Lambert, I do not fear to wear a dead man's coat. God rest his soul, and may his courage and faithfulness clothe me too! It becomes me, does it not?' she added shyly.

The garment was a coat of leather, soft with wear, reaching to her feet. Upon the neck and shoulders were sewn rings of steel, forming hauberk and shoulder-pieces. It was a garment of an elder day, an heirloom dearly prized by the deceased Bowman. There was no doubt it was becoming, for it fell in folds over her slight figure, and her face rose from the ripple of steel graceful as a daffodil from wet meadow grass.

She looked down it.

"Thank you, Wulf," she said, "it does for me right well. It is a little heavy, but it only needs a girdle."

Wulf hardly seemed to understand either Lambert's wrath or Jehane's warding of it. Lambert took the light belt of goatskin he had been wearing and buckled it round her.

"A wedding-gift," said he.

"A fitting one for a bride who comes to wed among famine, wounds and death," said Wulf. "See here," he half drew the sharp knife from Jehane's side, and looked at her with eyes that reminded her of a wounded boar she had once seen in the forest.

"If you are taken by the Mortimers, shall you know how to use this, Jehane of the woods?"

"Surely I shall," answered Jehane. "Such things are sometimes well to do, Wulf, but they are never well to talk of."

Wulf muttered an apology, and followed them up the stairway which led to the hall, which, being the only large room in the castle, served as guard-room, banquet-hall, and dormitory in one. It was situated over the main gateway, the other apartments being but cells in wall or tower; Gubenhale was built for defence, not residence.

The outer wall, that towards the river, was pierced with narrow loopholes, splayed inwards, with projecting stones for the archers to rest their elbows on, and admitting but little light; in the inner wall, that giving on the courtyard, was a window, protected merely with iron bars. Upon this wall the newly risen sun was now falling, casting the shadows of the bars in chequerwork upon the bare floor, where for long months now no reeds had been

laid for covering. A tressel-table and a bench or two were all the furniture. As many of the men who were not upon the walls sat or lay on bench or floor. Their drawn and sickly faces brightened somewhat at sight of Lambert, and they rose at his entrance ; all, that is, but three, who occupied a heap of straw at the darker end of the hall. One lay straight, covered, face and all ; another, crouched in a corner, nursed his wounds in silence ; by the side of the third a priest knelt, bending to catch the last words of a failing tongue. The penitent was a lad hardly older than Jehane.

As she and Lambert entered he finished his confession, and the priest raised his voice.

" Dominus Jesus Christus per suam sanctissimam misericordiam te absolvat, et ego auctoritate apostolica——"

Lambert strode across the room.

" I must interrupt you, father. There are others here who need your services."

" My first duty lies here," said the priest, "*—et mihi in hac parte commissa et tibi concessa——*"

" Father, I am in haste."

" Absolvo te ab omnibus peccatis——"

" Father, do my bidding. Wed me to this maid. Set not an example of disobedience to my men !"

The priest turned a wizen face and rebellious eyes, but the dying bowman interposed—

"Leave me, father," he whispered pleadingly. "God's mother is gentle—she will assoil me—Christ will pardon; but if you thwart Sir Lambert, he will never forgive me that I left the wall!"

Lambert caught the words.

"Rest you content, lad, I pardon you."

Weremund's head fell back, and the eyes of baron and priest met and clashed as they turned from him.

"Now, father, I and this maid will wed. Her name is Jehane, daughter to Pargeter the Woodward."

"Are you the spouse of her father's choosing?"

"Her father no longer gives her. She is past fifteen."

The priest shrugged his shoulders.

"Perchance; but I have seen her before. Is she not a novice of Saint Mary's? Have you the Abbess' consent?"

"Father Theodor, do my bidding. Wulf, act as next-of-kin. Come here, Jehane. Men, be you witnesses."

Obedience was instantaneous. The priest, fumbling in his wallet, dragged out a tattered manual and began—

"Lo, sires, we be here gathered together before God and all His angels——"

"Enough," interrupted Lambert, "we can wait for no admonitions. Come to the vows!"

The vows were hurried through. Lambert's voice was here and there almost inaudible, while Jehane's was far from steady. It was so very cheerless here in the bare hall, where the unwilling priest, the rude squire where her father should have been, the dying and dead for witnesses, and a bridegroom who went through the ceremony with absent eyes and fierce inexplicable haste. She was toppling on the edge between laughter and tears when there was a hitch in the ceremony.

"With this ring," began Lambert; then stopped, for he had none about him. "Wulf! A ring!"

"Where should I find a ring?"

"I care not, only find one. God's honour! Do not thwart me now!"

"Lady! Lady! Damsel!"

From the circle of men-at-arms half a dozen eager friendly faces were stretched towards her, and as many hands held out such steel rings as armourers make and sell to their comrades for charms.

"Take mine! Take mine! Take his, it has a heart on it!"

"Oh, thank you, how good of you all!" she cried, glad to smile and be smiled at again, "but I can only have one—what shall we do? I know! I will take the smallest."

The ring of Wilferth the arbalister came nearest to a fit.

"'Tis well you should have mine," said the man, in triumph, as she took the ring, still warm from his wearing, "it has a Latin motto in it, and is sovereign against all ills. Look, lady!"

Jehane peered within and read, "*Libera nos a malo.*"

"Come, Jehane," said Lambert, "give it to me. Father, proceed!"

The ceremony being resumed, the bridegroom placed the ring on each of the bride's fingers in turn: on the first in the name of the Father, on the second in the name of the Son, on the third in the name of the Holy Ghost; until at "Amen" the rough circlet came to rest in its bourn upon the fourth.

"I see that 'tis still far too large, Hardwin the armourer muttered to himself; "I will beat out a keeper for her, and so be even with master Wilferth!"

"And with all my worldly catel I thee honowre," ended Lambert, putting two coins into Jehane's hand. The priest closed the book.

"That is over," said Lambert, "now——"

"But you have not smitten me!"

"What is that?"

"It is part of wedding—any man will tell you—Wulf, take my shoe from my foot, since you are playing father, and, Lambert, smite me with it, to show you have taken over authority. I hope

you will not often use it, for your arm is stronger than father's ! ”

Lambert did as she asked him, but dreamily, and her attempt to make matters more cheerful was no success.

Standing beside her Lambert spoke to the men, his voice still uncertain, as it had been in the vows.

“ Men,” he said, “ you see this lady, my wife. You will be true to her as you have been to me. To-day, as you know, you cannot drink our health unless you do it at the castle well, but those of us who live shall meet again in this hall, and you shall sit at feast and eat and drink of the best with me. For each hour you have shared of my—of my—Aid me ! Aid me, Wulf ! ”

He reeled, a hand to his brow. Wulf put an arm round him and guided him to a bench.

“ What ails you, Lambert ? Are you sick ? ” cried Jehane, as he turned white and his head fell on his foster-brother's shoulder.

“ Yes,” he faltered, “ sick with hunger—a giddiness.—Wulf, cannot you find me one mouthful that I may—may finish my work here—I thought I should last——”

Wulf's lips worked into something resembling a smile of complacency, which sorted oddly with the angry anxiety in his eyes. Still supporting Lambert, he thrust his left hand into his doublet and drew

out a small cake of bread and a bottle of wine. This he unfastened with his teeth and set to the fainting man's lips.

The men-at-arms glanced at one another, and Ralf caught Picot his brother a cuff, saying, "'Twas you said he took good care to fill himself, whether we poor men went empty or no! Look at him now, whiter than cocket bread!"

Lambert quickly revived.

"Eat with me, wife," he said; "how well we keep the ordinances of the church! A fast before a wedding, and afterwards a feast!"

She tasted a little, Wulf watching them.

"I thought the time would come when 'twould be useful," he said, "I knew it was safe here. I could ever feel the bread and smell the wine. The men said I kept more fat within my doublet than was natural in honesty."

"God be good to you!" said Jehane, but he had relapsed into sullenness again.

The bread eaten, Lambert, still sitting between the two, once more called the men.

"What was I saying to you just now?"

"That when you came back as many of us as lived should have a feast," said one.

"That we were to be true to your lady as yourself," said another.

"I remember now. Jehane, these are my faith-

ful men. One day, God willing, you shall know them better. They have had little ease or profit in my service, but they have trusted me. Now is your chance, men, to show what you are made of. You know we cannot hold out. In an hour I surrender. I hope to save your lives. Wulf, part among them what food remains. Now, arm yourselves as if for battle."

The men, clattering hither and thither, armed themselves, and each took his bit of bread no bigger than a plum.

The priest had turned his back as soon as the ceremony was over, and was still at his unfinished absolution over Weremund, though the lad was dead.

"*Peccatis tuis vere contritis confessis et oblitis,*" he muttered ; then, seeing Lambert near, he demanded, pointing to the prostrate forms—

"What of these, my lord ? "

"We will take Thorald. The bodies we must leave. Do on Weremund's mail under your gown."

"I need no mail. Shall the disciple be better than his Master ? "

"Put on the mail, and go with the men. As you have more wits than they, I trust you will teach them sense, and you, learn of them obedience. Now, are all ready ? Wulf, take Thorald upon your back."

With Jehane at his side, he led the way down the

narrow stair to the storehouse, the mailed figures clattering behind. Old Roger and young Weremund, once bowmen, were left alone in the silent hall.

Lambert stood by the open chest until the men were ready. Wulf set Thorald on his feet, and they waited their lord's will.

"You see that chest? Through it is the passage which leads to the river below Lax. You need not fear to go down it, for I came up it myself not an hour ago; Ralf and Picot, who helped to dig it, will tell you it is safe. You will have to stay quiet till nightfall. The Mortimers will scour the country all day, but after dark they will slacken search, and if I know them, they will eat full and drink deep. When it is well dark, Father Theodor will give the word, and you can creep out one by one, and under cover of the willows it will be your fault if you do not win safety. It is the best I can do for you. If you keep your senses you will come to no harm. Father, lead the way."

"Why do you not lead us yourself?" asked the priest mutinously.

"Because I have a more difficult task," returned Lambert, stern though quiet, "I go to find the king, and for that I must have a horse. Beaugris would hardly enter a chest, though he is more obedient than you are; so I must break my own way through. When you hear the shouts of the Mortimers at the

gate, pray for me ! If I escape and get to the king I shall return with an army at my heels, and each man of you that meets me I shall count a friend, and he shall never regret his faithfulness to my house in peril. If I do not return, seek each of you a luckier master, and God go with you. Father, I trust them to your care."

The priest looked abashed. The men prepared to enter the chest, and Jehane whispered a word in Lambert's ear.

"Men, your lady graciously wishes to know your names, that she may remember you in her prayers."

Father Theodor went first, the lantern round his neck, and each wasted mail-clad figure that followed him turned to Jehane's eager pitying face and spoke his name. Alan : Roger the smith : Hamund : Alfric : Thorald : Scrob : Piers the cellarer : Ralf and Picot, his sons : Hardwin the armourer : Wilferth : Martin : Hugh. Each, as his head disappeared behind the dark carving, gave his last glance to Lambert, with the look, not of vassal to lord, but of brave man to brave man.

CHAPTER XXI

SURRENDER

WHEN all were gone, and the lid of the chest had been firmly secured, Lambert, Wulf and Jehane were left alone in the silent castle, so suddenly emptied of the clatter of mail, the shuffle of shoe, the voice of man. The only sound was the wailing of a child in the courtyard.

"Now, Wulf," said Lambert, as they walked slowly up the steps, "it is time you knew my plans. First we saddle Beaugris : next, with all quietness you unbar the postern ; unbar it, but leave it ajar, and wait there with the horse while I speak to the Mortimers. My reckoning all hangs on their leaving but one man at the postern—if there are two our chances are small. Having offered my submission from the gate-tower, I leave the wall as if to give orders on it ; you, making as much clatter as you can, fumble at the door with a rusty key, and make a long work of drawbridge and portcullis. While you are at that, we shall have time to get out of bowshot, if only I have luck to kill the guard

cleanly and without noise. This leaves you in a difficult position, but I see not how to mend it—do you ? ”

Wulf said nothing. Jehanè, even Jehane of the ready tongue, had been very silent since she entered the castle, for she was busy shaping her mind to its new position ; and as, without shrinking, she had put the new-slain bowman's coat over her head, so she now put on hardihood to face the seamy side of war.

Truly, as she crossed the courtyard, she shivered and turned pale at sight of the heap of suffering humanity whose gaze, pathetic as that of a dying dog, followed them.

“ They will be fed in an hour,” Lambert answered her glance ; “ the Mortimers are not butchers, neither will they want to till the fields themselves, so they will set these churls free, and treat them well.”

“ May I tell them so ? ”

“ Yes. No harm.”

She went towards them, crying as she went, “ Poor people, poor people ! In a very little time you will have food and drink, yes, bread and meat and milk and beer. Do not die yet ; it will very soon come ! ”

As they slowly understood, there was a movement among them ; they looked one at another, faltering thanksgivings with lips so thin they would hardly meet across their teeth. Such as had strength got

to their feet, crossing themselves and bowing their poor heads. They knew of no woman in the castle but such as survived among themselves : what then could be this figure which to their dizzy eyes seemed rather to float than to walk ? Whence, if not from the courts of heaven, this face more than mortally bright ?

One, stretching out her hands, cried—

“ Ah, holy one, tell us which of the saints you may be, that we may pray and praise before your image and light candles to it as long as we live ! ”

“ I am no saint,” said Jehane, “ no, nor like a saint ! I am only Jehane, your Lord’s wife ! ”

She reddened at so naming herself, and ran back, weeping a little, to the men who had been watching her.

The sight of Beaugris was more cheering, for he of all in the castle had fared best ; indeed it was only for the last few days that his fodder had been short. Wulf set himself to buckling the steel plates over the horse’s broad breast ; Lambert stood in thought.

“ How do you propose to get away ? ” he said in a low voice.

Wulf looked from behind the horse, his dark face one scowl.

“ Do you grudge me a good death ? ” he said.

“ This is no time for fooling ! I should go lightly,

should I not, if I gat my life by your death ? Think, man, in place of jibing ! ”

“ If you do not like my plan, stay yourself and let me carry off your bride ! ”

“ If your heart were like your tongue I would cast you over the wall ! If you could do my mission to the king—but as you could not it wastes time to talk.”

“ Waste no time on me one way or another. Let be ; and if the thing trouble you, understand that I shall be liever dead than living, and that by a great deal.”

“ Liever ? Perchance ; but you shall not have your pleasure,” said Lambert, brightening at a sudden thought, “ this is what you have to do. As soon as I have spoken to those without, I shall call for the portcullis to be raised and the drawbridge let down. You lower the bridges, which draws every Mortimer to the ditch ; you raise the portcullis some foot or so ; and there it sticks fast ; you go to find a lever, and being of an original mind you look for it in yon withe beds—for, mind you, while you were fumbling and groaning over the winches I have cleared away the guard at the postern and am fled on Beaugris. The Mortimers will hardly venture to crawl under the portcullis on their bellies until they have made sure there is none to put a knife in their backs, and before they find that out you should have time to be in

hiding. Make the best haste you can for the low cross at Timperlee ; God aiding, I will join you there : I shall have need of you. You will obey me ? You will hardly choose to-day of all days to disobey me ? ”

There was no reply.

“ I would you kept your ill temper for fair weather. But I cannot wait to find out if you mean to compass one, two, or three deaths ! ” said Lambert, losing patience. “ Come, Jehane ! ”

Jehane followed him in the direction of the southern gate-tower, and, looking back, saw Wulf, gazing after them.

“ He loves you well,” she said.

“ He did once, yet now he risks my life by his insane jealousy ; he is poisoned with it.”

“ Is that what makes him so disagreeable ? ”

“ He is never a joyful companion ; but he has hitherto been first in my heart, and he wants it unshared.”

All this while Lambert had given Jehane neither kiss nor caress, nor even a glance of love ; but throughout the swift stern business since they reached the castle, he had for the most part kept his hand upon her shoulder. It was there now, in the bitter moment when, standing upon the brattice of the gate-tower, he raised his horn to blow the blast that acknowledged defeat. Twice he raised it, and

twice his lips trembled and refused to close upon the mouthpiece. Mounting the embrasure he stood for a moment silent, looking down, the sunshine on his bare head, the herald's banner and horn in his hand, his throat rising ; then the hand that hung by his side felt about as if for something to rest upon, and Jehane moved near that it might touch her head. At that he found heart, and sounded the call for a parley. Quick came the answering blast, and out of the expectant ranks stepped the captain of the Mortimers ; a son, some said, to the earl himself. From where she stood behind the battlements Jehane could hear the voices.

" Lambert de Fort-Castel, do you surrender this castle and all within it, and the arms and provender both for horse and man, and your own body, to the will and mercy of the Lord Duke Hugh de Mortimer ? "

" I surrender."

" Unconditionally ? "

" You will spare the lives of my men ? "

" I will spare not a mother's son of you. I have made fair offers these months past, and you have refused. Not a week ago I told you I would hang every man of you if you did not come out. You have chosen—throw down your arms."

Lambert was taken by surprise, for he had forgotten this part of the ceremony, and every arm

of any value was upon the persons of his men. But he was not very long at a loss. Young Mortimer had roused him to bitterness and decision."

"I could keep the castle a month longer for all you could do to take it. That you will see when you enter. I surrender, but if you spare my men I will intercede with the king for you at your need. Piers! Hugh! Hardwin! Bring here the arms! Were-mund and Scrob, lower the drawbridge! Wulf, wind up the portcullis!"

He leaped from the battlement as if to hasten the execution of his orders, whispering to Jehane—

"Come! Haste! Haste!"

Reaching the courtyard they found Beaugris standing patiently at the postern. Wulf, groaning at the winch of the drawbridge, was noisily kicking meanwhile at a broken helm and shield. Lambert glanced at Jehane, and saw there was no flinching in her; he took her crossbow and raised it; aimed through the narrow space between door and jamb; the quarrel flew, and the bowman fell without a sound.

Lambert flung down the bow, jumped on Beaugris took Jehane before him, pushed wide the door, leaped the ditch, and rode for dear life.

CHAPTER XXII

FLIGHT

WHETHER or no they were espied by the victors before they gained covert ; whether pursuit was made, they did not know, for they never turned to see.

They went with a creeping skin ; for this ride of theirs was no dash of swift flight, firing the blood with speed, no bright peril stinging to laughter. Beaugris, save for a walk round the courtyard, had had no exercise since the siege began, so that galloping was out of the question, and even a canter would have risked a fall ; their pace was therefore limited to a slow stiff trot.

They jogged it seemed for hours over the quarter-mile of level, the woods retreating from their advance, the sun beating upon them with unnatural brightness, pointing them out with fiery finger as targets for those so eagerly seeking for their lives. How the hoofs rang where the rock cropped out through the thin soil ! How the harness,

both of horse and man, jingled over the ploughland ! Even when at last they gained the wood where they had once talked under the wild apple-tree, they were hardly better concealed. There was no going by sheep-tracks, nor hiding in thickets—there was only one path for the height and breadth of Beaugris, and that was the one which for a goodly part of its length was in full view from the north wall. The wood was probably well guarded, and from any bush at any moment might come the arrow that would end their flight. Lambert covered Jehane's body with his own ; she fingered the knife at her belt.

It seemed half a lifetime ere the path twisted and they reached Dowlas Ford, summer-shallow and easy.

Having climbed the steep lane to Hoar Cross, Lambert drew rein, let Beaugris hang his head and pant, and raised his own aventaile to draw breath more easily.

It was not at the bare four roads that they halted, where, far as they had come, a glint of sun on steel or the flying of Beaugris' mane in the wind might have betrayed them, but in the thick grove of silver birches behind the cross.

Hidden themselves, they could safely look down through the milk-white stems upon the familiar scene ; the dark woods, the green strip of water-meadow ; the river, pale-blue under pale-blue sky ;

and further, where the sparkling line of Lax Ford broke its flow, the towers of Gubenhale.

Even while they gazed, the first man gained the walls, climbed the turret, and shook out the Mortimer's banner from a lance-tip. Lambert saw the banner open in the wind, heard the shout that greeted it from the throats of the victors.

"God hurt them!" he cried. "May they be cursed in wood and water, in field and town, and may their arrows be blunt in their need, and their swords soft!"

"Oh no, not curses to-day!" cried Jehane, twisting in the saddle to look in his grim face.

Then he saw that she who had been so brave through so many dangers, and had faced the morning's work so cheerfully, was daunted at last. With difficulty he recalled his thoughts from his castle to his bride; but still he spoke with the hardness that had grown over him in the months of suffering and hopeless siege.

"Poor maid," he said, "how sorry you are you married me! If there had been no fears for Ursula, no trouble with the tanner, I might have whistled for my bride."

"You think I took you for fear's sake! Perchance you took me for pity's!"

"By God's face I did not! I have no time to speak of these matters, but I love you as strongly as

ever man loved maid. Cannot you believe me ? ”

He spoke the words fiercely, but there was no doubting their truth. Jehane coloured, but she was not abashed, and answered quietly—

“ And I love you, Lambert.” Then she added—

“ You will unsay what you said just now ? ”

“ I seem to have taken an obstinate wife. Do you expect me to love my enemies ? ” he said with a short laugh.

“ It is my morning-gift. You cannot in honour refuse it.”

“ What is the meaning of that ? ”

“ Do you not know the custom ? That much at least I know of marriage ;—that none ever refuses his wife’s first request the morning they are wed.”

“ Indeed ! ”

“ Yes. And oh, undo it. They say curses curse the speaker.”

“ Well, it is your first request. I grant it.” He spoke grudgingly, looking at Gubenhale with the Mortimer’s colours flaunting above it.

“ God hurt them not,” he said, “ only I pray Thee let me meet them soon with my sword bare and a handful of good men behind me ! It is better than they deserve ! ”

Turning then to the shrine where Our Lady, carved in oak, bent a sorrowful head, he crossed himself reverently, shook Beaugris’ bridle, and took

the grassy road which led northward to the heart of the forest. The sun was behind them, and the forest had drawn back its shadows into itself ; the moss beneath the horse's feet was hot and dry and slippery ; triplets of hazel-nuts shone pale among the undergrowth, and blackberries were beginning to redden ; butterflies shimmered in the wood's edge, between sun and shadow ; grasshoppers were crying, and before the eyes of the wayfarers was a dizzy mist of mirage. The sun beat down sickeningly on Lambert's mail, and he plucked green branches to shelter them. Jehane too plucked sprays for Beaugris' headstall. The great horse hung his head, as did his master.

"Courage, Beaugris," said he, "it is but a half hour and we shall be at the Woodward's, where are corn and water, and you shall rest."

"The last time I rode this way was with my father. Are we going to him now ? " asked Jehane.

"Yes ; we cannot go much farther without food and rest. We shall be as safe there as anywhere, and you can say your farewells. Perhaps, too, you will like to take some more gowns than the one you have."

Jehane laughed. In the kind familiar forest her heart sprang up from its unwonted sadness like some creature of the shore at the touch of the living tide.

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will have to get used to men's talk, and even to rougher tongues than mine."

"It is not that," said Jehane gravely, "it is not even the fear lest Ursula should be troubled, or the loss of your castle."

"Our castle."

"But I am afraid——"

"Afraid! Now that the worst is past? You who have been so brave! I shall have to learn more of a woman's ways if that is so. In all soberness, Jehane, the Mortimers have never come so far north as this, and I am sure they reached the walls too late to mark our flight. There are few like Wulf at a ruse when he has the will. They have given us up. They know not in which direction to seek us. There is no need for any fear at all."

"I was not thinking of Mortimers. What I fear is that all is not well at home. I feel no joy as I come nearer; no certainty that I shall find them there awaiting me. . . . Oh! Do you not smell smoke?"

"I do; and should not that comfort you and drive away your fancies? The wind blows from the dwelling and brings the smoke of your own hearth to meet you on your way."

"No! No! It is not oak, it is pine-wood I smell; and the only pines nearer than Wolferlow are in our walls. Ride faster—faster! The house is burning! I can hear the crackle of the gorse!"

"It is some forest fire, a spark from a careless hearth," answered Lambert; but quickened speed nevertheless, saying to himself that while the defenders of the marches were at war one with another was the Welshman's time to have his way; and the Welshman's way was ever fire and murder.

Soon it was plain that Jehane's senses had not deceived her, for the suck and roar of the flames grew more and more distinct; the snapping of the gorse sharper, the odour more pungent; and anon the smoke was visible, drifting slantways across the ride. They were not more than two hundred yards as the bee goes from the dwelling, but it was two hundred yards of thick underbrush, quite impossible for a horse and rider.

Jehane would have leapt from her seat and run direct had not Lambert held her fast and urged Beaugris to better speed than any that he had yet ventured upon. Hardly was he in the stride of his canter than he started and swerved, seasoned war-horse as he was; for rending through the trees came a sound so heart-pricking that one who hears it for the first time never needs to ask "What is that?" and once heard it is never forgotten—the shriek of a man suddenly and violently slain.

No need for Jehane to beg for speed now! Stopping low to avoid the branches, Lambert made short

work of the bridle-path ; and entering the space, saw at one glance the disaster and the explanation of it. The dwelling was a furnace, sending up a spout of roaring flame, whose fiery droppings of spark and stick were falling all around, and, driving into the orchard, scorched the ripe apples on the trees. At their feet was a dead man, marked for a Welshman by the dirty white cloak which alone covered his nakedness ; another lay close to the house, where a spark had set him smouldering ; under the branches there was quite a dirty white heap of them ; and near to these lay the form of a larger man, huddled at the foot of a tree, as though before he fell he had set his back to it in a single-handed defence against numbers.

Keeping a wary eye upon the apparently harmless bodies, Lambert urged Beaugris, in snorting objection to flames, close to the group.

" It is Edwy ! " cried Jehane. " I know his green doublet ! "

Keeping her beside him, Lambert roughly ascertained that all the Welshmen were surely dead before he sheathed his sword and stooped to their slayer.

Edwy was living, but a knife was deep in his side ; so deep, that though his agony was a sight that moved even the warrior, he knew that to draw it out would be his death.

Lambert raised him against his knee ; Jehane

fetches water from the spring in her steel cap. In a little while Edwy recognized her, and when she had poured water in his mouth he could speak.

"Not safe—the Welsh," were his first words.

"Where are Ursula and father?"

"At Wenlock—you should not be in the forest. Go back!"

"They are safe? Then why are you not with them?"

"I—was. We had warning—we escaped yesterday—but Prince bit through his bridle and got away. I came for him—they—were too many—besides—they throw knives. Jehane! Why are you here? Who is this?"

He tried to see who was supporting him.

"It is Lord Lambert. He is my husband now!"

"A—ah!"

The bewilderment of faintness and pain which had distorted his features, passed, revealing a new, a wiser Edwy. He spoke calmly.

"In that case—all is well with you—and you will forgive. . . ."

"Oh yes, oh yes! You never meant to hurt me!"

"You will—pray for me? . . . Ask Ursula to pray——?"

"Yes, yes, dear! The Good Lady of Pity."

"No, no! Not the pure Mother of God! She

would not understand. Pray to—Pray to St. James the Penitent—he is the saint for men like me—he—he knows! It is well for Ursula I die. Now go. They will return.”

“I shall not leave you. Lambert will defend us. They will not dare return while he is here.”

“No! He must take you away. They—throw knives.”

“We will take you with us! I shall not leave you. The Welsh might return before we could send you help. Even if Lambert told me I should not go.”

Edwy looked at her with a strange smile that kept her eyes on his face in a kind of expectancy. He made himself understood with difficulty, but he never took his eyes from her face that bent over him.

“You will not leave me? Brave Jehane! I might live—an hour yet! But dead—you will leave me then! Remember—St. James the Penitent——”

Speaking the last words he rose to his elbow with an agonizing effort, gathered himself up, snatched the knife out of his side, and, with one moan of “Oh, Jehane!” sank down in the rush of his blood.

Lambert, who had not followed the rapid, faltering words, started to his feet in horror and amaze.

“God’s Goodness! What is this!” he exclaimed, drawing back his feet.

"He bade me go—I said I would not—he said if I would not leave him living, perchance I would when he was dead—and then—he did that!"

She laughed.

"He—I told you—he is ever doing something one does not expect—this Edwy! But oh, Lambert! You do not think God will cast him into hell for such self-murder as this? All in his care for me!"

She did not laugh again, nor weep, but gazed at the body in a fascination of horror, and began to shake from head to foot. At this moment a gentle whinny was heard.

"There is Prince," said Lambert. "Catch him, please, we have need of him. Lose no time."

Jehane rose obediently, calling—

"Prince! Prince! oh, wicked Prince, come here."

The pony had braved the now declining fire and the dead Welshmen so far as to answer his mistress' voice. Now at her call he put his head out of the thicket to which he had retreated; but as he would not come any nearer, she was obliged to go towards him.

Lambert looked down on strong Edwy.

"If a Saxon tanner can die like that," he said, "what must God expect of earls!"

He stooped and touched the dead man's breast.

"I wish I could dig you a grave, tanner; but for

that I should risk a life you loved better than your own. Instead I will do your will and take her out of danger."

He took Edwy's sword, hauberk and helmet, fastening them to Prince's saddle ; then, wrapping the dead man in his own cloak, he carried him into the forest, laying him among the undergrowth where he would be hidden from men's eyes, probably for ever.

The soft forest floor was his bed, moss his pillow, Bracken spread its broad fronds over him for coffin-lid ; while instead of cross or stone a tall pale mullein bent over his sleeping face, beautiful in its new stillness. The strong arms of the oaks held up their curtain of darkest green to shield him from the prying daylight.

"Peace be with his soul !" said Lambert, covering his face. "He made a brave end, whatever the church may say to it. Come, Jehane, we must ride."

CHAPTER XXIII

A MAN NEEDS TWO TO LOVE HIM

JEHANE wanted to ride Prince, but this Lambert forbade ; until they were out of the woods she was safer before him on Beaugris. So Prince was tethered to the saddle-bow, and, deeply offended thereat, made himself as troublesome as he knew how, pulling and sidling, and jibbing and whinnying, till Beaugris looked at him in grave surprise, while Lambert turned about and smote him with his mailed hand, distractions which were, perhaps, good for all concerned. But at best it was a sad ride and a weary one.

The noonday was hot, and the horse so tired that they dared put him to no pace but a walk. Downhill, downhill, by the River Ride where once Jehane had ridden with Edwy in the rain ; uphill and uphill, through the wood called Eymore, on foot now, since neither Mortimers' arrows nor Welshmen's knives were to be feared, and Beaugris' legs were trembling beneath him on the steep paths. The trees met overhead, but the vertical rays beat upon them as

upon a tent, and beneath was a heavy stillness even harder to bear than the sun. No deer moved, no bird or beast fluttered or cried ; all waited for the reviving hour of sunset. None but the dragon-flies, the gnats, and the ants—little black ants, great red forest ants, and ants that rejoiced in a brief August glory of wings—shared the path with the fugitives ; the hum of insects was the only sound except the horses' slipping hoofs and panting breath, and their own words of encouragement to them. Danger of pursuit was over, but they did not pause ; for horror of blood was behind them, and present with them was the fear that horse or man would drop exhausted before shelter could be reached. It was a sad ride and a weary one.

Their first aim was the ridge of a hill that ran parallel with the river at a distance of about a mile.

Here a low white cross marked one of the limits of the domain of the Abbacy of Saint Cynebert's ; and it was here that Lambert had told Wulf to meet him.

It was noon when they passed out of the windless wood, climbed one steep meadow, and were upon the bare gorse crown of the hill, the sweet reviving wind in their faces. They turned to it, breathing deep ; the forest, with its death and danger, lay behind them ; before them the open plain and a new life. Beyond the forest they could see Clee Castle,

where, as yet, the banner of the Fort-Castels still waved. But no Wulf was at the low cross.

Lambert rubbed down the trembling and lathered Beaugris with a wisp of grass ; then paced along slowly, looking for any sign of his foster-brother, and even ventured a call upon his horn. The only result was the appearance of an old crone at the entrance of her mud hovel. She was ugly, old and guilty-looking ; and, on being questioned, swore that she had seen no one ; or only her son, who was within, sick of a fever.

Whether she took Lambert for a Mortimer or the anomalous figure with the face of a maid and a knife at its belt, and long plaits of hair falling over a coat of mail, for something worse than human, she certainly defended her privacy to the best of her power ; glaring at them with the expression of a dog who would like to bite but is afraid of kicks. She moved backwards to her den, her head between her shoulders and her chin thrust out.

They were turning away, when her behaviour was explained by the appearance of Wulf at the door. He might in truth have passed for a man in a fever, so disordered were his looks and so strange the excuses he framed for hiding from his master instead of meeting him. Lambert took little heed, thinking it only the effect of the long strain of the siege suddenly relaxed, and the flight afoot in the sun.

The old woman, seeing in this change of affairs a hope of double reward, now placed her all at their service ; and when they had satisfied their hunger with porridge and goat's milk, and had cared for the horses, which they tethered in a shed that was a counterpart of the hovel, they settled themselves to rest until the evening.

With the comfort of food, the sense of security and the dim light, a great weariness fell upon them. Wulf flung himself in a corner and hid his face ; Lambert stretched himself on the floor with his helmet for a pillow, and slept as he had not done for months ; Jehane, who had been making friends with the old cotter woman and begging crusts for Prince, returning, found them so.

It was hard to believe that this stern-faced, sleeping warrior, whose hand was on his sword-hilt, was her husband ; strange, too, to think—and here she smiled—that this was the hour of afternoon repose at the convent. How quietly had their morning passed, how wildly hers ! Elizabeth would be thinking of her, perhaps Sister Magdelene, dear soul, would try to keep awake and pray.

She could smile, for other, nearer memories she kept at bay—the burning house, the dying Edwy, and the attendant image of Ursula, suffering, widowed.

“ I will not think, I will go to sleep ! ” she said,

as the prisoned thoughts showed faces at the bars' "Why should not I sleep too?"

But although she was young enough and tired enough to have carried out this resolution, there was a difficulty in the way.

The hut, though no worse than others of its kind, was dirty; the floor of beaten earth witnessed that the human occupants shared its shelter with poultry, and Jehane also divined that in hard weather the presence of a pig had been tolerated.

She bore with the place as a refuge, though she would have greatly preferred the open hill; and she consented to sit upon the floor because there was nothing else to sit upon; but bring herself to lie down she could not, since there was nothing upon which to rest her head. The one cloak they had brought with them in their flight had been left in the forest, and was now for ever no cloak but a shroud; and though she might have found heather or fern on the hill, there was nothing in the immediate neighbourhood of the hut but gorse, and she knew she would do wrong to wander far.

This difficulty in obtaining repose increased her desire for it. She tried to follow Lambert's example, and use, soldier-fashion, her steel-cap for a pillow. But it happened to be a conical one, and whatever the merit claimed by the shape for diverting sword-cuts, this one at least proved, by the activity with

which it rolled away as soon as she laid any weight upon it, to be most unsuited for a pillow.

Next she tried resting her head upon her own bent elbow ; but the steel rings of her sleeves pinched her cruelly. Then she looked enviously at Lambert's deep slumber, as he lay in the only posture for an armed man, upon his back. His right arm was stretched across his body to the sword-hilt, his left lay along the floor.

It was very tempting, that outstretched arm, and he so sound asleep !

She looked at it more and more covetously ; hesitated, looked again, listened to his deep slow breathing, and at last, with great caution, laid down and reposed her head upon it. Lambert's hand clenched and relaxed, but he did not wake, and almost before she knew how good it was to rest, she was sleeping as sound as he.

Wulf turned himself about and stared with feverish angry eyes at the sight which to a healthier vision would have seemed a pretty one.

In the hovel it was growing very dim, and such light as entered was brown and slumberous ; but outside upon the hill daylight still blued the under-leaves of the poplars, as they turned with a sound like that of the river upon the fords. So high were the tree-tops that one among them might see to the west the mountains of mid-Wales, and

to the east the high plain of the English Midlands. Their leaves were never still ; even from April, when they first unfold, soft and tender, till October, when they fly, curled and shrivelled, before the wild winds of autumn, they never rest, but live their lives dancing with multitudinous happy sound. Softer and mellower grew the light ; warm on the gorse-bushes, purple in the shadows, gold-dusted in the valley of the Severn which lay under the sunset, solemn over the plains.

When, after a sound sweet sleep, Jehane awoke, it was quite dark.

At first she thought herself still in the convent, in her own bed in the bare dormitory, and wondered what had awakened her, since no matins bell was to be heard insisting that the body must yield to the soul ; then suspicion that all was not as usual was conveyed to her mind by an unfamiliar odour as of fowl-pens, mingled with the less unpleasant but equally unfamiliar one of leather garments ; lastly, her pillow moved beneath her head, and her wakening was sudden and complete.

'Swift as a pigeon's flight the events of the day rushed through her mind—her father was homeless, Edwy dead, Ursula a widow, herself a wife.

Lambert stirred, and with a sound of half-aroused discomfort bent his arm slowly and rubbed it. At this a sudden bubble of merriment took Jehane

unawares, and woke him. He remembered and sat up.

"Jehane, is that you?" he whispered.

"Yes."

"Did you lie upon my arm?"

"Have I hurt it? Is it pins and needles?"

"I dreamed the castle fell on it. Where are you, wrong-doer?"

"I am here."

"You are my wife, Jehane."

"Yes, Lambert."

"Then do my bidding. Kiss me!"

"If I do not obey shall you beat me?"

"Of a surety I shall."

"And of a surety I am loth you should."

He stretched out his arms, feeling for her; and when they found her she did not move away.

The sun had gone down, the stars had risen, and it was time they thought of departure. Lambert and Wulf were in the shed harnessing Beaugris, and the Baron was informing the squire of his plans.

"We first go to Saint Cynebert's, and then rest a day, perhaps two; for I must have Beaugris in better condition than this; his near fore-leg is hot, and I cannot have him fail me. Thence, too, I shall despatch a messenger to Pargeter at Wenlock, and another to my father at Clee, though there is small chance he will win through. I would have sent you,

but you are too weary. You had better see if this old beldam can find you some sort of a mount, and follow us to-morrow."

"I am not coming with you."

"Not coming with us? What do you mean?" said Lambert in amaze.

"That you can seek a new squire."

Lambert stood back.

"Are your brains astart or mine? Or have you some grievance?"

"I am a free man. I suppose I may seek a new master?"

"Yes," answered Lambert slowly, "you are a free man. But I think you have fever; in your right mind you would not tell me so, like a discontented man-at-arms. To put it no otherwise, a man does not, in the hour of defeat, abandon the lord whose good fortune he has shared, without falling under the imputation of treachery. And beyond that—why—*Wulf*—" he cried, his coldness turning to a more generous tone, "it pleases you when you are ill-humoured to call yourself the man and me your lord—it is your way to say such things; but whose fault is it that you are not a knight and my equal? Not mine, as you know well. Is our oath of the brother-in-blood nothing? An oath I might have sworn with princes' and earls' sons, and swore with none but you! Are all the days and nights we have

passed together since we were babes in one cradle, nothing, that in such a day as this you should say of a sudden, 'Get you a new squire'? Not one of those poor lads we left behind would do so to me. There is that between us two that at least deserves truth should be spoken. You are angry with me for some cause. What is it? For by the saints I know of none."

"Have I ever grudged you my service?" answered Wulf thickly. "Did I not refuse knighthood that I might be free to serve you only—to be your servant till one of us was dead? To polish your knightly arms was better to me than to wear the spurs myself! But now—you need me not! Find you a squire used to ladies' service—there are plenty to be had!"

Lambert was patient; it was an old habit to bear with Wulf, and their tempers had come into such frequent and violent collision in their youth that they had learned to take hot words from one another without offence. He was touched, too, by Wulf's open confession of devotion. He had guessed the cause of his glum, persistent refusal of the spurs, but that was another thing from having it spoken plainly.

"You cannot leave me now. Later, if you will, but not now, on the very day of my defeat, with so difficult a journey before me. How could I take a

stranger to squire, without time to test either his fitness or his faithfulness? Wulf—"as he spoke he moved towards him—"I know that you are thinking that my marriage will stand between us. It will not. Come with us to Saint Cynebert's, then, if you will, leave me; but not now."

"I will not—come with you!"

The phrase was broken by an involuntary choke of pain.

Lambert raised the lantern and looked at him. In ordinary hours of life Wulf's face expressed little; it was heavy, dogged. Now the deep lines of long-endured hunger, the hollows under the broad cheek bones and round the eyes that burned within, would alone have pleaded for an extreme of forbearance with one who had suffered so much in his service; and beyond this there was an expression of misery, of loneliness, of the anguish of jealousy, which wried and twisted his features like physical pangs.

Lambert was shocked by the suffering of which he only half divined the cause; he walked round Beaugris and put his hand on his foster-brother's shoulder.

"Brother, why will you not come with me?"

"Wulf pushed his arm away, but weakly; he seemed suffocating.

"I will not come—with you—lest I be tempted

to put a knife in the woman that stands between us ! ”

“ What ! God’s ears ! That mine should hear such a word ! But it shall be your last ! ”

He drew his sword and set its point at Wulf’s breast. Wulf looked down at the blade ; not the most blood-thirsty could have completed the act and slain him. Lambert let the point drop, sheathed the weapon, and without another word walked out of the shed.

Jehane, who was awaiting him, was near fear at the sight of his face.

“ Mount,” he said ; “ we will be going.”

“ Is not Wulf coming ? ”

“ No.”

“ Then shall I not bid him farewell ? Though he follows us to-morrow, does he not ? ”

“ He will not follow me again.”

“ Have you quarrelled with him ? What has he done to make you so angry ? ”

“ Angry ? I am not angry.”

As he spoke he flushed red across the eyes ; then, turning pale, he snatched the sword from his side and thrust it through and through a furze-bush into the turf beneath, till the little black ants ran out ; then he flung it down, grinding it into the turf with his armed heel. Had it not been well-tempered it must have broken.

When he had recovered his self-possession Jehane was standing a little way off, regarding him gravely.

"I am going to speak to Wulf," she said.

Ashamed of himself, and exhausted by his fit of passion, Lambert spoke low and dully.

"You had better not ; he is mad."

"Madder than—— ? But if he ails anything you would not have left him."

"Yes, madder than I. He is jealous that I have married you. He would have had me live single for his sake. Thank God I am clean of his blood. To-morrow he will repent."

"To-morrow you will not be here to forgive. Oh, Lambert, you and he cannot part so !"

"It is no fault of mine. You must not go near him. He is dangerous."

"He will not hurt me ! I may not be able to bring him to ask your forgiveness, but I will try. Poor Wulf ! He looked so miserable ! You will both be ever sorry if you part in ill-will. I know he must have said something very dreadful, and I know he hates me ; yet I cannot but think of all I have heard about him ; how when you were children he tried to take the blame for your faults, and in Normandy how he stood between you and folly, and I saw him with my own eyes carry bread and wine in his breast to feed you when he himself was starving ! and now, when he is sick from hardships (I could see

it), you will listen to his hasty words and part after a ten minutes' quarrel; and am I, on whose account you quarrel, not to be allowed to say a word to assuage it?"

"Our Lady knows I said what I could, but do as your soul bids you, Jehane. I am not fit to say you nay!"

"Truly, I think I am right to go. I may do no good, but it seems I can hardly make matters worse."

When Jehane entered the shed, Wulf was standing as Lambert had left him, with hunched shoulders and eyes fixed on his breast where the sword-point had been. He did not move when she entered, but set his teeth and was still.

"Lambert tells me that you will not travel with us to-night, so I have come to bid you farewell," she said in her clear, childlike voice.

Wulf shook with a shudder.

"You will not wish me farewell, I know. You hate me so, that the sound of my voice sickens you; but I have something to say that Lambert could not, for he loved you too well, and you angered him. I do not know what speech was between you, except that for the first time you refuse to go where he goes, and I know the cause. The cause is this Jehane, is it not?"

There was no response.

"You love Lambert. Yes, but a man needs two to love him : a brother and a wife. He has as much need of you as he ever had, and you do not rightly to grudge him a wife as well. I cannot take your place any more than you can take mine."

He twisted towards her with a savage movement.

"You know little either of him or me, when you venture between us."

So fierce his words, so bitter his tone, so black his glance that Jehane almost believed that he was in verity mad, almost wished she had taken Lambert's advice and let ill alone ; but now the light fell on him she could feel nothing but pity, though instinctively she hid it, and spoke sternly in her young earnest voice.

"I know little of him, and less of you ; yet I shall speak, for I am set you shall have no excuse. You would die for Lambert, he tells me, but he does not want your death ; he wants a living friend at his side in his perilous, difficult journey. He has lost all—his castle, his men, his lands ; and now you will take from him his only brother whom he thought true as the word of God ; and his squire, whom he can hardly replace. He rides away a defeated man, and poor, yet you grudge him what comfort there may be in me, who it is certain will on such a journey be rather a burden you should help him to support,

You to think you love him ! And would wring his heart to-day of all days ! Would he do so to you ? Even I know him better than that ! ”

She waited for a word, but none came, though the man's throat worked.

“ You and he are very likely parting for ever, and he will be saddened all the while and all the way to think you could desert him for so small a cause. What am I compared with a brother like you ! You will never see his face again ; yet you will not ask his pardon. What sort of love is that ? What sort of truth ? ”

Her voice had left its tone of vivacious reproach, and ended in a sadder, slower note. Wulf covered his face with his hands, and his body writhed as if the devil in possession were rending him.

“ Farewell, then, and God pardon you ! I must comfort him as I may.”

Wulf seemed struggling to speak, and Jehane waited ; but he could not form a word, and lurched against the wall, with such a groan that, alarmed, she fled softly to Lambert, crying—

“ Lambert, go in to him, he is sick ! I fear he is dying ! Give me the bridles ! ”

Lambert threw the bridles to her, and ran to the hovel.

It was some time before he returned, and when he

came to Jehane as she stood holding the horses in the soft, uncertain light, his eyes were full of tears.

"Is he dead?" she cried.

"Nay. His sickness was sore; but not wholly of the body. And he is better now."

"Is all well between you?" she whispered.

"He follows us to-morrow," he replied, and kissed her with solemn emotion.

CHAPTER XXIV

FAREWELL TO THE FOREST

THEY got to horse and rode away slowly under the poplars along the ridge in the grey starlight.

Before they left the high lands, whence they could see both east and west, they halted.

Towards the east, the way their path lay, the heaven above was a latticework of tenderest cloud. Behind its exquisite bars the risen moon was hid, yet could not be wholly prisoned by a barrier so delicate, but betrayed herself by the shining of her raiment, in a halo that was blue at the centre, expanding to rose and gold, of colours tenderer than any known to earth. Above the cloud-bars and the covert radiance of the moon was a clear space too luminous to hold a star, and thence fell the light that showed the travellers their path ; showed the valley, faint with mist, which they must traverse, and the plain beyond, its low billows of wood and meadow, its woods, its roads and marshes, its streams and

towns, all merged and lost ; beyond, confining it, rose the line of the Clent Hills, low and bare.

As Lambert and Jehane watched, the moon rose from behind her frail screen ; the poplar stems grew pale ; the grass was silvered over and the bushes cast deep and deeper shadows. A cluster of heavy-foliaged oaks stood up like a herd of great beasts browsing upon the hill-side ; all things near at hand took shape and substance in the clear shining ; but upon the plain, under the dazzling of the moon, all was faintest silver mist, through which nothing could be distinguished, not even the great tower of St. Cynebert's. Only on the hills a speck of red light burned, a cresset, perhaps, upon some castle wall. A welcome ? A warning ? The hearts of the fugitives thrilled to the unknown.

But Jehane turned and looked back towards the west, where the past was. Between long, still, soft-edged sweeps of cloud the last of daylight lingered, very soft and grey. Beneath them lay the forest, its outline merging into cloud, itself a cloud. Infinitely vast it seemed, infinitely far, infinitely sad ; featureless, solemn, mysterious, withdrawn.

“ Are you very loth to leave it, my Jehane ? ”

“ Very, very loth. But glad too. It will never be the same again to me, since I have seen my home burning, and Edwy lying there. I go with you so gladly, and the great world seems to hold out such

kind hands towards us—such a beautiful, sunny world, and the forest so sad ! And yet, Lambert dear, when I come to die, bring me back to the forest ! I do not think I *could* die anywhere but there ! ”

“ Wife,” he said tenderly, “ unless I am much mistaken in the ways of the king and the strength of my own arm, we shall return to drive out the Mortimers at the edge of the sword, and keep our Yule in Gubenhale ; and all the forest will be free for you to ride in.”

So she put heavy thoughts behind her ; and out of her sorrow looked at him with great gladness ; and they turned their backs on the forest and rode to the east in the faint summer night ; across the heath, down a steep and slippery fir-wood, through a fair valley with sudden-cropping red rocks and many owls, over the sandy plains towards Saint Cynebert’s.

THE END

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